

Perception of Parents as a Couple and Reported Current Marital Social Skills

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to verify the relationship between adult children's perception about their parents' conjugality and these children's conjugal skills today, as married people. Participants in the study were 472 married Brazilians (217 men and 255 women, $M = 41.32$ years old, $SD = 12.78$), with average time of marriage of 14.41 years, $SD = 14.95$, who responded the self-reported instruments Perception of Parents as a Couple Scale—PPCS and Marital Social Skills Inventory—MSSI. To study the relation between instruments, first a two-factor measurement model for the PPCS and a five-factor measurement model for the MSSI were examined in confirmatory factor analyses. Then, the hypothesized, theoretically derived structural model was tested, depicting path coefficients estimates for regressions from factors of the PPCS onto factors of the MSSI. The overall model presented satisfactory fit indices. Seven out of ten structural path coefficient regression estimates were statistically significant, as well as all item reflective regression estimates for both instruments. Pairs of same-item opposite sign loadings, simultaneously correlated to both PPCS factors were considered logical contradictories. The explicit-implicit concept from cognitive psychology was chosen to account for them, given the theoretically meaningful cross-loading of items between the first factor (“explicit”) and the second one (“implicit”). This is interpreted as indicative of psychological ambivalence in sons and daughters' perception of parents as a couple. It is concluded that, among a number of aspects the perception of father and mother as a couple the PPCS accounts for, ambivalence is the source of a major influence in current marital social skills.

Keywords

Generational Psychic Transmission, Marital Social Skills, Ambivalence, Implicit Measures, Structural Equation Modeling

1. Introduction

In contemporary marriage the ideals of romantic love tend to be fragmented, especially through the pressure for women's emancipation and female autonomy. The notions of "forever and the only one", marks of the romantic love, do not prevail in contemporary conjugality (Magalhães & Féres-Carneiro, 2003). Giddens (1993) calls the "confluent love" the one that presumes equality in giving and receiving affect and that develops from intimacy. The author conceptualizes the conjugal bond as "the pure relationship", considering that this bond only remains if it is able to provide satisfaction to both partners.

Despite intense transformations in conjugality, such as the significant influence of the imperatives of intimacy and privacy proper of the notion of the modern subject, love is still considered an important component in the notion of conjugality. However, the search for love is still framed in terms of an ideal of conjugality, constituting an idealization increasingly difficult to be achieved (Bauman, 2004).

Simmel (1964) points to the serious consequences the contemporary ideal of marriage can bring. According to this ideal, we desire the other in his or her entirety and we intend to fully penetrate his intimacy. As a result, individuals have to function as inexhaustible reservoirs for latent psychological contents. In addition, the satisfaction of total surrender can produce a sensation of emptiness. There is an increase of expectations, an extreme idealization of the other, and self-demanding higher standards, causing tension and conflict in the conjugal relationship that can lead to separation (Magalhães & Féres-Carneiro, 2003).

Contemporary self, which is structured on the notion of an autonomous individual, uses love as a form of compensation to make sense of its own existence, reinforcing the sense of belonging (Freire-Costa, 2004, 1998). To the extent that the subject feels he belongs to someone, and that someone belongs to him, this link does not imply a disconnection from the world, with no rupture from being an autonomous subject. The author emphasizes that the contemporary subject lost traditional supports of identity donation, and constantly seeks to reassure himself. The loving relationship includes the hope for reassuring the self from the other in intersubjective exchanges.

Psychoanalytic literature about loving relationships highlights that conjugality originates from the family unconscious plot of subjects-partners, through the family discourse. This way the identifications and the myths present in the phantasmagorical plot are constituted (Piva, 2006; Bucher-Maluschke, 2008). Thus, parents' conjugality is reflected in their sons and daughters' affective-sexual development, and in the patterns of relationships established in the family. McDougall (1993) points out how the configuration of adult children's sense of sexual identity is associated to the parental couple, mainly through identifications with both parents.

In the psychoanalytic family therapy literature conjugality is founded in the couple unconscious loving choice (Inglez-Mazzarella, 2006; Lemaire, 1988; Safra, 2004; Willi, 1982). Eiguer (1984), when discussing the unconscious organization of the couple, defines the conjugal link as the superposition of two object relationships that hold as identification models the representation of the parental couple.

Family romance and genealogy are notions that can be related to the idea of generational psychic transmission. Based on the Freudian text, Carreteiro (2001) assigns two meanings to the term family romance. It refers to the fantasy constructed by the child as she deconstructs the idealization of parents' image. Parents are originally perceived as perfect figures, filled with superior qualities. From the construction of a fantasy the child restores the parents' image, often appealing to the idea that she is the product of a lineage of social prestige. However, even when children assign to parents aristocratic signs, they include memories from the real parents. The other meaning highlights that families construct a family romance with the support of histories passed from generation to generation, including myths, sagas, and secrets. In the case of intergeneration psychic transmission, the narrative, the speeches and the family sayings occupy a prominent place, serving as resources to heritage transformations and elaborations (Carreteiro, 2001).

The notion of generational psychic transmission refers to the subject's inscription in the chain in which he is a link. The subject submits himself to the structuring of his subjectivity, on the one hand, and to the psychic development of what the subject inherits, on the other hand. Finally, he submits himself to his belonging to the family group, and to the intermediate formations that articulate the intra and intersubjective psychic spaces (Magalhães & Féres-Carneiro, 2004).

Kaës (2003/1993, 2000, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2012) emphasizes that generational transmission implies the mixture of times and spaces, potentially triggering repetitions, pathologies or creative and innovative elaborations. The subject, as well as the family and the couple has, as a task, to construct, to organize and to transform heri-

tages, elaborating them. In the context of psychic elaboration, we can fundamentally circumscribe two orienting principles of transmission: the principle of the idealization of conjugal union, and the principle of the constitutive ambivalence of conjugal relationships.

Thus, the high value attributed to marriage has to be understood in terms of the idealization processes, and the attempts to recover the narcissist completeness from early existence, holding parents' omnipotence as a model. In this sense idealization is presented as a privileged way to reach narcissistic fusion with the loveobject (Lejaraga, 2002). Indeed, in order to sustain an idealized conjugal relationship it is necessary to *deny* our own perceptions, unsatisfactory at times. In other words, it is necessary to close our eyes to what do not correspond to our wishes as a way to assure the apparently perfect union. Denial designates precisely the process of refusing the perception of certain aspects of external reality capable of generating displeasure to the subject (Freud, 1925/1996). Such aspects are not integrated into the subjective repertoire, and are maintained out of the subject's conscious reaching.

Among the aspects difficult to be tolerated are the subject's hostile feelings and tendencies towards the other. This is a conflict inherent to human relationships. It can at times present itself as a strong component in the weakening of the affective link. The experience with another must be predominantly of tolerance and continence to the subject's demands, so that is possible to integrate the divided affects of ambivalence. This latter is composed by opposite feelings and tendencies simultaneously directed to one same object. In the complete ambivalence opposite tendencies are supposedly present, but one of the antinomical elements, in a specific moment, must be necessarily unconscious. Anyway, a subject's originality and health are evidenced through the ways his fate is recognized and transformed, printing his or her authorship, and integrating what has been transmitted to him in a creative movement (Magalhães & Féres-Carneiro, 2007; Ziviani, Féres-Carneiro, & Magalhães, 2012).

Indeed, parents' conjugality refers to something prior to the respondent's current marriage, such as discussed in the generational psychic transmission theory (Kaës, 2003/1993, 2000, 2006, 2009, 2012), starting with Freud (1914/1996). In fact, even before the love date there is a place for organizing conjugality in each partner's psyche. This place reunites the subjects' pre and current history, their ideals of conjugality, the images and fantasies related to their parents' and their ancestors' conjugality, which will engender in the future conjugal self (Magalhães & Féres-Carneiro, 2004; Magalhães & Féres-Carneiro, 2007; Ziviani, Lins, Féres-Carneiro, & Magalhães, 2014).

In this sense, it is plausible to hypothesize that sons and daughters' perceptions about their parents' conjugality could influence their current conjugal social skills. Even though underlying the conceptual base for the *MSSI* social skill assessment we find the social performance, the social skills, and the social competence constructs. In such a theoretical domain, a social situation sequence of behaviors is considered either a competent, or an incompetent social performance. As an evaluative attribute of that performance, a functional and coherent social competence depends on its accordance with the individual's thoughts and feelings (Del Prette & Del Prette, 2013).

Thus, social skills are classes of behaviors belonging to the individual's repertoire, and are ready to play a significant role in bringing about socially competent performance. In the dynamics of interactions, and certainly more so in the dynamics of the dyadic interaction in marital relations, social capacity qualifies the proficiency of a competent social performance. In so doing, it necessarily refers to the dyad members' capacity to organize thoughts, feelings, and actions in conformity with their respective goals and values, harmonizing them with situational demands (Del Prette & Del Prette, 2001; Del Prette & Del Prette, 2011; Del Prette & Del Prette, 2013). In a nutshell, marital social skills are no different in the sense that they are situational, culturally determined, assertiveness-oriented and, above all, learned, e.g., social skills can be systematically taught through therapeutic or preventive programs. Nevertheless, marital or else, "the existence of an elaborated repertoire of social skills", consider Del Prette and Del Prette (2013), "is a necessary but insufficient condition for socially competent performance. A set of personal factors (thoughts, feelings, personal values, attributions, beliefs, plans and targets) can facilitate or hamper social performance in different situations" (p. 50).

There comes the caveat that an approach like the *PPCS* may help to overcome—particularly concerning thoughts, feelings, personal values, and beliefs. For the marital social skills can be understood as "a set of behaviors proper of the social interaction with the spouse or affective partner, which conspicuously contributes to the quality of marital relationship" (Del Prette, Villa, Freitas, & Del Prette, 2008: p. 67). Literature attests that individuals with satisfactory marital social skills tend to show greater affective investment in the relationship (de Andrade & Martins-Silva, 2013) and greater marital satisfaction (Villa & Del Prette, 2013).

Hence, taking as a starting point the notions of identification with the parental figures, of generational psychic transmission, and of family romance, this study aims at verifying the relationship between adult children's perceptions about their parents' conjugality and their marital social skills as partners in intimate relationships.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants in the study were 472 married Brazilians (217 men and 255 women, $M = 41.32$ years old, $SD = 12.78$), from six states in Brazil (Pernambuco, Distrito Federal, Minas Gerais, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Rio Grande do Sul), with average time of marriage of 14.41 years, $SD = 14.95$. Most of the respondents had a complete higher education (67.80%), and considered themselves belonging to the middle-class (60%).

2.2. Instruments

Initially sociodemographic data were collected (sex, age, time of marriage, schooling, and self assigned social class: low, middle-low, middle, middle-high, high). Later participants responded to two self-reported instruments.

First, the *Perception of Parents as a Couple Scale (PPCS)* (Ziviani, Féres-Carneiro, & Magalhães, 2011), which intends to evaluate the parents' conjugal relationship, such as perceived by their sons and daughters. It is part of a 60-item *Likert* type, five categories (never, rarely, sometimes, frequently, always) instrument on their perceptions of father, mother or both taken together as "parents". *PPCS* is a scale composed by 26 items, which includes both positive and negative aspects of conjugality, such as: my parents used to exchange physical affection, my parents used to kiss in front of their kids, my parents used to hug each other in front of their kids, my parents used to share daily responsibilities, my parents used to break objects when fighting, my parents used to ridicule each other, my parents used to verbally assault each other, my parents used to engage in ugly fights (see [Figure 1](#)).

This scale was developed by Féres-Carneiro (2003) from the literature on the structure and the dynamics of conjugal link, as well as other instruments (the *FBQ—Family Background Questionnaire*, Melchert, 1998; Melchert & Sayer, 1998 and the *ERINCH M—Marital Inventory*, Fowers & Olson, 1989; Olson & Fowers, 1993). Its classical psychometric characteristics were evaluated (e.g., Cronbach's alpha = .96), exploratory factor analyses, principal components analyses, as well as the testing of confirmatory factor analyses measurement models were performed in previous studies (Féres-Carneiro, Seixas, & Ziviani, 2006; Féres-Carneiro, Ziviani, & Magalhães, 2007; Ziviani, Féres-Carneiro, & Magalhães, 2009).

The data from the present sample replicate the internal covariance structure modeled and successfully tested in a previous study, with a larger sample split in half, a calibrating and a validating subsamples (Ziviani, Féres-Carneiro, & Magalhães, 2011). Using "unique to EQS" (Bentler, 2006: p. 162) specification search of modification indices strategy, the authors validated the inclusion of cross-loaded items, ordered following three succeeding generations of confirmatory factor analyses alternative measurement models (Ziviani, Féres-Carneiro, & Magalhães, 2011). Thus, the current *PPCS* measurement model for the present study new sample is also hypothesized as presenting two factors. Factor *PPCS1* is composed by all the 26 items. It evaluates the face value, general perception of parent's conjugality. Factor *PPCS2* emerges from the first factor, and it is composed by 19 items. This double-loading, or cross-loading coefficients of similar magnitude and opposite sign are theoretically conceptualized as contradictories.

Furthermore, following Ziviani, Féres-Carneiro, & Magalhães (2011), it is also hypothesized, in order to facilitate the interpretation of that kind of model, that the two factors prompted themselves to be named after the implicit versus explicit distinction currently commonplace in the cognitive literature (Carlston, 2010; Kihlstrom, 2008; Kihlstrom, 1999). For the differentiation between implicit and explicit mental representations, Carlston (2010) argue that one possibility is to assume that they are "separate and independent", and that "some kinds of representation (e.g., affect and procedural memory) tend to be more implicit than others" (p. 39). One can thus define implicit mental representations as "those a perceiver is unaware, which are not retrieved intentionally, whose effects are relatively uncontrollable" (p. 40). Kihlstrom (2008, 1999) presented basically the same views—in distinguishing between implicit and explicit perception, memory, and motivation, actually extended the construal to an overall unconscious cognition concept. In addition, the measurement and evaluation of the explicit

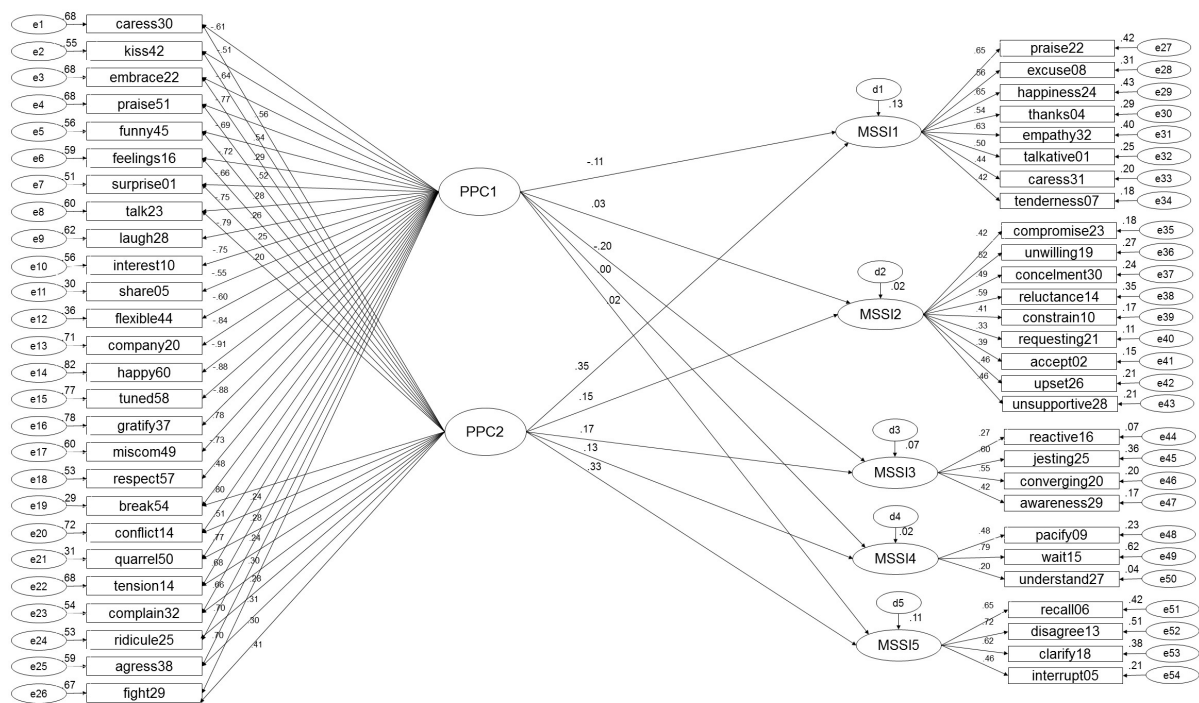


Figure 1. Hypothesized structural model relation between the Perception of Parents as a Couple Scale (PPCS) and Marital Social Skills Inventory (MSSI).

and implicit *PPCS* factors was undertaken following De Houwer, Teige-Mocigemba, Spruyt, & Moors (2009) stringent observations.

Loadings of opposite signs in the second component of a principal components analysis are to be expected with an all positive correlation matrix like the one produced by the *PPCS*—they are a necessary result of the method, and component scores so produced are orthogonal and uncorrelated, i.e., independent (Jolliffe, 2004; Dunteman, 1989). Similar magnitudes with opposite signs are interpreted, logically, as a contradiction, i.e., item pairs as such can be seen as contradictory, as opposites, instead of logical “contraries” (as distinguished in de-LaPlante, 2014, for instance). Pairs of items presented themselves contrasted with similar magnitudes and opposite signs, as expected. What is surprising, and of the utmost interest, is *which* items prompted themselves to fill in vacant places in contrasting pairs in theoretically significant ways, i.e., items’ meanings that make theoretical sense as a pair. It is the case, in the present study, that a number of pairs do make sense as indicative of real and typical psychological ambivalence of the parental conjugality.

It is at this point that the De Houwer et al. (2009) definition of an implicit measure comes out as an ideal standard to which our proposal of the implicit *PPCS2* factor should be compared—implicit measures are defined as “outcomes of measurement procedures that are caused in an automatic manner by psychological attributes” (p. 347). Our tenet is that the *PPCS2* factor labeled as “implicit” is an effect from automatic (i.e., unintentional, unconscious, uncontrollable) psychological processes caused by the psychological attribute or construct (i.e., ambivalence) the measurement model was designed to assess (i.e., perceived parents’ conjugality). The latter is a synthesis drawing on Gawronski, LeBel, Peters and Banse (2009) description of the three criteria proposed by De Houwer et al. (2009) to establish that a measurement outcome is indeed an implicit measure. First, the “what” criterion: the measurement outcome, i.e., differences in variance should be causally produced by the psychological attribute the measurement model is aimed to assess. Second, the “how” criterion: examination of the processes by which the psychological attribute causes these variations. And third, the “implicitness” criterion: further specification on whether the underlying processes are “automatic”, i.e., “are the relevant processes unintentional, unconscious, efficient, and/or uncontrollable?” (Gawronski et al., 2009: pp. 369-370). These are the major theoretical considerations called for to explain the *PPCS* explicit (outside) versus implicit (inside) factors,

taken as one and only dimension modeled by the Möbius strip (Ziviani, Féres-Carneiro, & Magalhães, 2011), in which the outside is the inside, and the inside is the outside (Priest, 2010). The one-dimensional concept thus conceived was further extended to the father and mother proposed indissoluble link theory (Ziviani, Féres-Carneiro, & Magalhães, 2012), for “the dissolution of marital relations does not imply the dissolution of parental ones” (p. 166).

The *Marital Social Skills Inventory (MSSI)* (Villa & Del Prette, 2012) is a scale composed by 28 items that evaluate the frequency of emission of social skilled behaviors in the marital context. The *MSSI* is composed of five factors: *MSSI1, Expressiveness/Empathy*, which relates to the abilities of expressing understanding, feelings, desires, and positive opinions to the spouse (in this factor there are also included the couple’s behaviors of intimacy); *MSSI2, Self-assertiveness*, which relates to behaviors of expressing feelings, opinions and preferences, usually accompanied by some risk of displeasure to the other; *MSSI3, Reactive self-control* refers to behaviors in which the spouse seeks to defend himself, maintaining self-control and preserving the relationship in the face of stressful situations; *MSSI4, Proactive self-control*, which evaluates the skill to perceive whether the spouse is emotionally distraught and *MSSI5, Assertive conversation*, which refers to behaviors that one of the spouse ask for the other (i.e., change of behaviors, clarifications), with the goal to ensure reciprocity in the exchanges within the couple’s relationship (see **Figure 1**).

Participants should estimate the frequency with which they behave in the ways described in each item, using a five-point Likert scale that varied from “never or rarely” (in each 10 situations of this type, you react this way two times maximum) to “always or almost always” (in each 10 situations, you react this way from 9 to 10 times). The instrument’s classical psychometric qualities have been attested in previous researches (Del Prette et al., 2008; Del Prette & Del Prette, 2013; Villa & Del Prette, 2012).

2.3. Procedures

The research project was approved by the university Ethical Committee. The questionnaires were applied and administered by researchers from universities in the six Brazilian states where data collection was conducted.

Using a missing value analysis procedure (SPSS) for a close scrutiny of the original 518 respondents’ data set, no systematic source of variation was found, considering Graham (2009). Consequently, cases presenting missing values for any of the 26 *PPCS* items, and any of the 32 *MSSI* items the subjects actually responded were omitted in the analysis. The questionnaires were applied and administered by researchers from universities from the six Brazilian states where data collection was conducted.

A restriction was imposed on the respondent-to-be in the data collection casual sample process. In sending the questionnaires to collaborating researchers, strict recommendations were forwarded: the respondent should be married, or should be partner in a love relationship, but should not be married, or partner, to other respondent in the sample. The independence of observations was thus guaranteed. Consequently, the independence of respondents in relation to one another in the present study lead to an increasing confidence in the empirical analyses results. This is not always the case in the couple and family effects research literature. More often than not, the sample is mixed, i.e., with married individuals with no spouse in the sample, as well as couples spouses married to each other. In case of the latter, in a full sample composed of couples the unit of analysis should be the dyad. More so when family-of-origin’s generational transmission is examined (Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003), and intra-couple estimation of effects can be appraised (Dennison, Koerner, & Segrin, 2014) in structural equation models in which nonindependence is an issue to be considered (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006).

In order to evaluate the model’s goodness of fit the following indexes were used: *CFI* (*Comparative Fit Index*), *GFI* (*Goodness of Fit Index*), *TLI* (*Tucker Lewis Index*), and the *RMSEA* (*Root Mean Square Error of Approximation*). The indexes *CFI*, *GFI*, e *TLI*, when present values higher than .90, are considered adequate indicators of good fit. If the values of these indexes are between .80 and .90 it means that the model has an acceptable, but poor fit (Marôco, 2014). In relation to *RMSEA* .08 is the maximum acceptable limit (Arbuckle, 2011). It is true that Browne and Cudeck (1993) argue that .05 or less for the value of the *RMSEA* would indicate close fit, but they are “... also of the opinion that a value of about .08 or less for the *RMSEA* would indicate a reasonable error of approximation” (p. 144).

3. Results

The hypothesized structural model relates the Perception of Parents as a Couple Scale (*PPCS*) with the *Marital*

Social Skills Inventory (MSSI). It presented a reasonably good fit to the variance and covariance structure, $GFI = .75$, $CFI = .81$, $TLI = .80$, $RMSEA = .06$. It was verified a negative and significant effect of the explicit conjugality factor from PPCS1 on the MSSI factor MSSI1, Expressiveness/Empathy, $\beta = -.11$; $p = .042$, as well as a negative effect on the MSSI3 factor Reactive self-control, $\beta = -.20$; $p = .014$. Most importantly, all five of the PPC2 implicit factor path regression weights from the PPCS scale on the MSSI were positive, as depicted in **Figure 1**. The coefficients were the following: MSSI1 Expressiveness/Empathy, $\beta = .35$; $p < .001$, MSSI2 Self-assertiveness, $\beta = .15$; $p = .018$, MSSI3 Reactive self-control, $\beta = .17$; $p < .029$, MSSI4 Proactive self-control, $\beta = .13$; $p < .085$, and MSSI5 Assertive conversation, $\beta = .35$; $p < .001$.

4. Discussion

In relation to the explicit conjugality factor, a tendency can be detected. The more favorable adult children's perception of their parents' marriage is, i.e., the more they perceive their parents' relationship as satisfactory, the lower their skills to express feelings and thoughts in relation to the spouse (Expressiveness/Empathy). Expressiveness includes both the positive and the negative aspects, considering the health of conjugality. Thus, these adult children are poorly skilled to express affection, compliments, and opinions. They also present lower skills to express aggression, discontentment and demands to the partner. In this sense, although they show a significant reduction in the continence of affects and certain intolerance to conjugal impasses, they do not conflict with their spouses, maintaining accordance in the marriage routine (Reactive self-control).

In regards to the factor implicit conjugality, we clearly verify that the greater adult children's perceived ambivalence related to their parents' marriage, the greater their skills to express feelings and thoughts in relation to the spouse (Expressiveness/Empathy). In such cases, sons and daughters are more reactive and assertive, not hesitating to talk about any issues with their partners or to affirm their preferences and dissatisfactions (Self-assertiveness, assertive conversation, Reactive self-control).

Thus, there is space to contradictory emotions, to making mistakes or failures more naturally, being more tolerable with a higher degree of tension and turbulence in the conjugal context. So, if on one hand the general satisfactory perception about parents' conjugality establishes a negative relationship with expressiveness, ambivalence will result into a reverse effect, causing adult children to develop more communication skills with their spouses.

From the obtained results we observe that sons and daughters, when perceiving their parents' marriage as satisfactory, present a greater idealization of conjugal relationship in comparison to the ones who legitimate and accept ambivalence as an affective reality present in parents' conjugality experience. Such idealization allows creating a myth of ideal conjugality that often imposes itself as an obstacle to tolerating the negative aspects of couple's coexistence, in the search of needed adjustments. This data corroborate the idea of Freud (1914/1996) about idealization, elevating the qualities and the values of the other to perfection, keeping the spouse apart from reality.

We understand that, when aspiring an idealized relationship with the spouse, such as satisfactorily perceived in their parent's marital relationship, sons and daughters establish expectations impossible to be reached, transforming ideals into illusions that, in turn, dissolve into disillusionment, as they do not resist the proof of reality.

5. Conclusion

There are numerous identifications, myths and coexistent affects that weave conjugality. Human being needs love, but there is someone who holds aggression as a component in his subjectivation process. Thus, there will always be the duality between love and unconscious hostility, turning ambivalence into the prototype of human relations. On the one hand, the tendency for opposition of affect, when legitimated, can facilitate the development of conjugal social skills. On the other hand, it was found that idealization presents itself as an impediment factor to the experience of satisfaction and tolerance to the conflicts in conjugal interactions.

It was found that the experience of current conjugality is marked by the ways in which people had appropriated the experience of their parents' conjugality, bringing vestiges of the past as constituting elements of the present. We consider that evaluating the repercussion of generational psychic transmission of parents' conjugality, such as perceived by sons and daughters, is important in the sense that it enables the understanding of current conjugal conflicts, and the creation of new pathways for its symbolization.

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