

Parents, Children and Sense of Control

*Dorothy Watson**

To the extent that people believe that their own actions can bring about a valued outcome, they are said to have a “sense of control”. This is a key factor in understanding why people act as they do. When individuals feel that their actions can make a difference to important aspects of their lives, they are motivated to take action. If, on the other hand, they feel that their actions do not make a difference, there is little incentive to act. To what extent has the sense of control of adult children been affected by that of their parents? This question is addressed in a recent article.**

The strength of a person’s sense of control is known to be linked to favourable outcomes in areas such as education, health, and mental health. We know also that a sense of control is linked to social class, and is higher among men than women. People’s sense of control can be strengthened by direct experience – when one’s own actions make for a better outcome – but can also be learned from observing the experience of others – for example, when a parent takes an action which has a positive result. This raises the question as to whether the sense of control of children is positively influenced by the sense of control of parents. To address this question, we used data from the 1994 *Living in Ireland Survey*, which gathered data on the sense of control of more than 1,600 adult children, aged 16 to 25 and living in the parental home. Data on both children and at least one parent was gathered by face-to-face interview. The analysis controlled for the social class and education levels of both parents and children, and allowed for the possibility that there are differences in the strengths of the influences going from mothers and fathers to daughters and sons, as there is some evidence of differential impacts in the literature.

Psychologists measure a sense of control using a scale constructed from seven questions (ranging from “Sometimes I feel that I am being pushed around in life” to “I can do just about anything I set my mind to”). The scale ranges from 0 (very low sense of control) to 10 (very high sense of control)

* dorothy.watson@esri.ie

The sense of control of both fathers and mothers was positively associated with the sense of control of the adult child. This effect remains significant when controlling for the education, economic status and social class of both parents and the young adults. The findings suggested that the sense of control of mothers had a significantly greater effect on daughters than on sons, but we did not find that father's sense of control has a stronger impact than mother's sense of control on sons.

We then checked whether there was a difference in transmission to sons and daughters of a high sense of control. The results here were very interesting: a mother's sense of control only had a significant impact on the sense of control of sons *when the mother's sense of control is high*. On the other hand, both sons and daughters were influenced by the sense of control of fathers, and it made no difference whether the father's sense of control was high or low. Daughters were influenced by the sense of control of mothers, with no difference when the mother's sense of control was high. This is consistent with the proposition that boys will generally be influenced by male role models but – if we can interpret high sense of control as indicating 'power' – will be influenced by a powerful female role model. The effect is a very strong one: the sense of control of fathers would have to be increased by about 4 points on the 10-point scale to have a similar impact as having a mother with a sense of control in the top quintile.

Unlike sons, daughters are not influenced differently by a mother with a low or high sense of control. This, again, is consistent with research findings that girls are less influenced than boys by the power of the role model. The reason for the impact of high maternal sense of control – but not of maternal sense of control across the whole range – on sons can be understood in terms of the centrality of mastery and control to the self-image of men and boys. To the extent that power and control are more salient for males, we would expect them to be more influenced than females by a role model with a high sense of control.

** D. Watson, 2011. "Yes We Can? Gender Differences in the Influence of Parental Sense of Control on Young Adults" *European Sociological Review*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcr070>, Published online 24 August 2011.