

## PERCEIVED EMOTIONAL SUPPORT IN FAMILY TRIADS: GENERATION AND GENDER DIFFERENCES

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The perception of emotional support exchanged within the family is determined by several factors: it is influenced by the personal characteristics of the perceiver, the personal characteristics of the support provider, the relational uniqueness of their relationship, and the family context. No studies have analyzed generation and gender differences within those components of emotional support. In the present research, perceived emotional support was studied in 168 Italian family triads (father, mother, and young adult child) using a round-robin design analyzed with the Social Relations Model (SRM). Generation and gender differences were investigated within that model with the purpose of verifying the invariance of the SRM factors. Results showed that family members similarly perceived emotional support from each other, even if some differences due to the relationship type and the family role were found. Methodological issues have been discussed.

Key words: Family relationships; Intergenerational relationships; Invariance; Perceived emotional support; Social Relations Model.

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### INTRODUCTION

Most of the literature regarding perceived support has highlighted the fact that support judgments are not so much determined by the enacted support received (Barrera, 1986; Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett, 1990), but by other factors, including: the perceiver's stable personal characteristics that may affect the judgment of support (perceiver factor); the individual characteristics of the person target who is judged (partner factor); the unique relationship between the perceiver and the target (relationship factor); and the overall climate of the context in which perception of support happens (contextual factor) (Branje, van Aken, & van Lieshout, 2002; Lakey, McCabe, Fiscaro, & Drew, 1996; Lanz, Tagliabue, & Rosnati, 2004).

The study of perceived support within the parent-child relationship has shown the relevance of studying the different factors that determine perceived support. Indeed, the relational interdependence between family members, that is, their mutual influence, may have different effects on how people within the family perceive support from other family members. For instance, the support perceived by the child from his or her father may depend on the child's judgments regarding support received from both parents (perceiver factor), on the individual characteristics of the father (partner factor), on the unique relationship between the child and his or her father (relationship factor), and on the overall family climate (contextual or family factor).<sup>1</sup> All the factors

cited have a role in determining the perception of support, although the relationship factor seems to be of greater influence (Sarason & Sarason, 2006).

One of the most suitable ways to differentiate the four determinants of perceived support is to use the Social Relations Model (SRM; Kenny & La Voie, 1984). The SRM is a theoretical and methodological approach to the study of interdependence within small groups, often used for studying families and perceptions of family relationships, both in basic and applied research (Cook, 1994; Cook & Dreyer, 1984; Cook & Kenny, 2004; Kashy & Kenny, 1990). The SRM disentangle the variance of support perceptions into four sources of variance (the perceiver, the partner, the relationship, and the family), and an additional part of error (the variance not explained by the four sources) (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). The family has been defined as an organization of primary relationships founded upon the difference of gender and the difference between generations and lineages (Scabini, Marta, & Lanz, 2006). As Cigoli and Scabini (2006) pointed out, generation (parents and children) and gender (husband/father and wife/mother) differences are structural features of the family. This definition underlines the relevance for family studies to investigate similarities or differences in the family subgroups (Lanz & Rosnati, 2002). Moreover, those structural features shape family roles.

Studies which applied the SRM to the perceived support within the parent-child relationship found that all the four factors help to determine the perception of support, although there are differences in the extent of the contribution depending on the generation and gender considered. However, those differences were detected only in a descriptive way, but they were not tested for statistical significance. For instance, Branje and colleagues (2002), in comparing parents' and adolescent children's perception of support within the family, found that parents' perceptions were more affected by the overall family climate and the unique relationship they were judging (family and relationship factors), whereas adolescents' perceptions were more affected by the children's view of support from family members in general (perceiver factor). The partner factor did not seem to be particularly relevant in determining perceived support, especially when evaluating support from the mother. Another study by Lanz and colleagues (2004) compared parents' and young adult children's perception of support within the family. The authors did not find any differences in the extent to which perceiver and relationship factors determine parents' and children's perceived support, but rather in the extent to which the family factor determines support perception: the family factor resulted more relevant in parents' perception than in children's. In the same study, the partner factor, especially when mother support is evaluated, did not appear to be significant in determining the perception of support. In these studies gender differences were also found, which regard differences in fathers' and mothers' perception. Branje and colleagues (2002) observed that fathers' perceptions and mothers' perceptions were similarly determined by the four factors, although fathers' perceptions were more determined by the perceiver factor than mothers'. Lanz and colleagues (2004) found a more mixed picture, and concluded that differences were more related to the relationship type assessed by fathers and mothers.

In conclusion, relational support can be approached at multiple levels, due to the interdependence between the partners and between the different relationship types within the family (Lakey & Scoboria, 2005; Tagliabue & Lanz, in press). In this paper we investigated the different components of the perceived support by testing their invariance in generation and gender family subgroups.

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## AIMS

The present study analyzed the factors affecting the perception of emotional support within families with a young adult child, by statistically testing generation and gender differences. Due to the interdependence of family data, this statistical comparison was done by testing constrained models on the different subgroups (gender and generation) within the families, and not with classical multigroup analyses.

The first aim of the present study was to investigate the perception of support by analyzing whether there were differences due to generation in the extent to which each factor determined perception of support within the parent-child relationship. The second aim was to verify whether there were gender differences in the way in which factors determined the perception of support.

Emotional support was chosen as the specific provision, because of its positive effects on several stressors in an individual's life (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992), and on different aspects of individual well-being (Lakey et al., 2002; Vangelisti, 2009).

## METHOD

### Participants

One hundred and sixty-eight triads composed of one young adult and of his or her two parents participated in the study. The young adults were living with their family of origin, attending university in the northern part of Italy, and were preparing to defend their Master's thesis. The mean age of the young adult participants was 25.46 years (range 22-33,  $SD = 2.08$ ); 32.10% of participants were males and 67.90% females. The fathers' mean age was 57.13 years (range 48-74,  $SD = 4.66$ ), and the mothers' mean age was 54.22 (range 46-73,  $SD = 4.88$ ). Most young adults (93.40%) belonged to a middle-high socio-economic status. More specifically, 2.70% of young adults lived in families with a monthly income of 500 to 1000 €, 15.60% lived in families earning 1000 to 2000 €, 32.00% 2000 to 3000 €, 36.10% 3000 to 5000 €, and 13.60% over € 5000.

### Procedure

Young adults were recruited through their thesis advisors or the university administrative offices during 2004. After verifying, via telephone or e-mail, that the participant had the desired characteristics, the researchers set up an appointment with him/her. During the appointment, research aims and the structure of the study were explained. The young adults were then given questionnaires to be separately completed by the students and their parents, and a second appointment, in which questionnaires were to be handed back, was scheduled. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire independently from one another and to return the questionnaires in separate envelopes before any discussion of the study took place. A similar proce-

dure (asking participants to complete questionnaires individually at home) had already been employed in previous studies on the SRM (e.g., Cook, 2000; Hsiung & Bagozzi, 2003). In general, participants were given 10 to 15 days to complete the questionnaires, and their anonymity was guaranteed.

### Instruments

Participants were asked to rate the perceived emotional support on a self-report scale. Emotional support was measured through nine items from the Relational Support Inventory (RSI; Scholte, van Lieshout, & van Aken, 2001): the six items of the warmth versus hostility dimension, and the three items of the acceptance dimension were selected. These nine items were chosen because they measure the affective/emotional function of support which is central to all the family relationships examined in this study. A sample item is: "This person shows me that he or she loves me." Participants were asked to state, on a 5-point scale ranging from *very untrue of this person* (1) to *very true of this person* (5), how much each statement was true for each relationship evaluated. Each family member had to answer each of the nine items twice (one for each of the other two family members). The scale presented good reliability (range  $\alpha = .78-.88$ ).

### DATA ANALYSES

#### The Social Relations Model

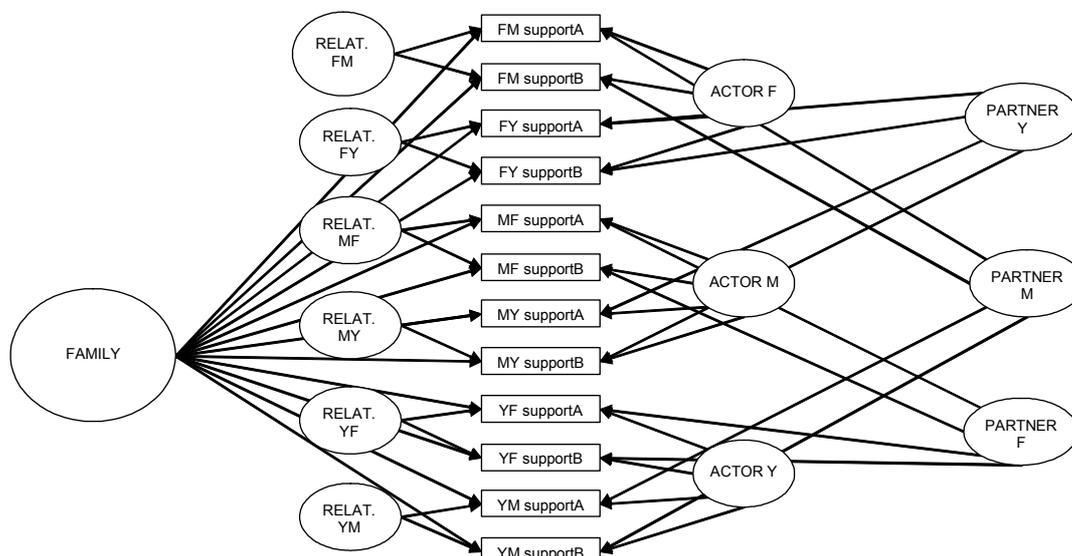
According to the SRM (Kenny & La Voie, 1984), the perception score obtained by person A who assesses the relationship with person B depends on the personal characteristics of person A (called actor effect), the personal characteristics of person B (called partner effect), their unique relationship (called relationship effect), and the context (called group or family effect). In the literature on perceived support, these effects are considered the four factors that determine the perception of support. The actor effect may be considered as the expression of the perceiver factor, the partner effect of the partner factor, the relationship effect of the relationship factor, and the family effect of the family factor.

In family studies a round-robin design, in which all family members assess all the other family members, is often used. When this design is applied to test the SRM, variance in scores is separated into the four components (actor, partner, relationship, and family variances), and this is done for each family role, because each is distinguishable from the others.

In the present study, the SRM was used to separate the perceived emotional support score variance into the four components: actor, partner, relationship, family. The SRM was estimated with a confirmatory factor analysis using LISREL 8.52 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1996), in which factor loadings were set to 1 and factor variances were estimated (Cook, 1994; Kashy & Kenny, 1990). Factors were interpreted as the independent latent variables that cause observed variables, treated, in their turn, as dependent variables.

In a three-family-member design, the SRM indicates how much variance of the six family scores is explained by each of the hypothesized components. In this design, thirteen components are possible: three actor variances, three partner variances, six relationship variances, and one family variance (see Figure 1).

SRM analysis is composed of three main steps (Cook, Kenny, & Goldstein, 1991). In the first one, all the SRM variances are estimated for each relationship. Because at least two indicators are needed to estimate a latent variable, two indicators per dyadic relationship are needed to estimate relationship variances. For this reason, the nine items were split and two indicators were calculated, averaging across items. Items of the warmth versus hostility dimension and items of the acceptance dimension were randomly assigned to both indicators. Twelve observed variables were, therefore, used, and their variance was separated into the SRM thirteen components. Figure 1 shows the model tested.



*Note.* FM = father assesses mother; FY = father assesses young adult; MF = mother assesses father; MY = mother assesses young adult; YF = young adult assesses father; YM = young adult assesses mother. SupportA = average of RSI five items; supportB = average of RSI four items. Family = SRM family component; Relat. = SRM relationship component; Actor = SRM actor component; Partner = SRM partner component. In the figure, dyadic reciprocities and residual variances of each indicators are not showed.

FIGURE 1  
 Variance partitioning in the SRM components.

In the second step, three dyadic reciprocities were estimated by correlating the relationship variance of two family members who were assessing the same relationship type. Generalized reciprocity — the correlation between the actor and the partner variance of the same family member — was not estimated because, with three family members, it is not possible to estimate all the parameters indicated in the three steps because of the limited degrees of freedom.<sup>2</sup> In the third step, errors were correlated as follows: for each relationship there are two indicators, therefore correlations between error terms of the same indicator in the same role were set.

Several structural equation models (SEM) were utilized. To verify the hypotheses on generation and parents' gender differences, two nested SEMs were compared: a baseline model and a constrained model. The baseline model was the confirmatory factor analysis of the SRM used to disentangle the variance of perceived support scores by different family members into the four components. The constrained model is the baseline model in which fathers' actor variance was set equal to mother's and children's actor variance. The same comparison between the baseline model and the constrained model was made for each of the other variances (the partner, and the relationship). More specifically, relationship variances were compared in two ways. In the first, relationship variances related to the same partner were forced to be equal. In the second, relationship variances related to the same relationship type were forced to be equal. Comparing baseline and constrained models allowed us to test whether there were differences in the variance explained by the actor, the partner, and the relationship effects according to the generation or gender considered, or whether the factors were invariant.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the reliabilities, the means, and the standard deviations for perceived emotional support in the six dyadic relationships. A series of *t*-tests were performed to examine any difference in the perceived support between distinct dyads. No difference was found for any comparison.

TABLE 1  
 Descriptive statistics of perceived emotional support

Dyads	Total		
	$\alpha$ ( <i>N</i> )	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Father-mother	.81 (168)	4.38	0.50
Father-young adult	.79 (168)	4.37	0.48
Mother-father	.88 (168)	4.27	0.66
Mother-young adult	.78 (168)	4.37	0.46
Young adult-father	.84 (168)	4.40	0.51
Young adult-mother	.81 (168)	4.44	0.48

### Social Relations Model Analyses

The baseline model (Figure 1) separated the variance of perceived support scores into the four components for each family member. The fit of the model was quite good. The chi square

was not significant,  $\chi^2(44) = 59.94, p = .06$ , and other fit indices were satisfactory: RMSEA = .05, NNFI = .99. The young adult partner variance was negative and not significant, and was therefore fixed to 0. This change maintained a satisfactory fit of the model. The chi square was not significant,  $\chi^2(45) = 61.12, p = .06$ , and other fit indices were also considered to be good: RMSEA = .05; NNFI = .99 (Table 3).<sup>3</sup>

Table 2 shows the variance estimates for the SRM components and their significance. Actor variances were all significant. This means that differences in perception of support by different family members were due to the perceiver's individual characteristics. Mother and young adult partner effects were not significant, and the latter was equal to 0 indicating that variance was not significantly explained by this effect. There are two possible explanations: within each family, members do not agree on the supportive personal characteristics of the partner they are evaluating. Alternatively, there are no differences between families in how family members perceive support from the mother, or the young adult child. On the other hand, the father partner variance was significant and thus differences between families in perception of support received from the father were due to differences in the personal characteristics of the father himself. Furthermore, relationship variances were all significant, meaning that differences in emotional support perception should also be attributed to the particular relationship between two family members. Finally, because the family variance was significant, differences in perception of support were also significantly due to differences, among families, of the emotional support climate shared by family members.

TABLE 2  
 SRM variance estimates in the baseline model

Variances	Family members		
	Father	Mother	Young adult
Actor	.030*	.052*	.076*
Partner	.028*	.015	.000
Relationship with:			
Father		.220*	.055*
Mother	.080*		.039*
Young adult	.084*	.059*	
Family		.065*	

Note. The family variance is the shared variance of all family members' perceptions, that is why only one value appears in the Table.  
 \*  $p < .01$

In order to discover the presence of generational or gender differences between parents, in the amount of variance explained by the actor, partner, and relationship effects, constrained models were tested. A separated constrained model was tested for each of the components: the actor, the partner, and the relationship (Table 3).

TABLE 3  
 Model fit indices, parameter estimates,  $\Delta\chi^2$  ( $\Delta df$ )

Model	$\chi^2$ ( $p$ )	$df$	RMSEA	NNFI	$\Delta\chi^2$ ( $\Delta df$ )
<b>B<sub>0</sub></b> (baseline)	59.94 ( $p = .06$ )	44	.05	.99	
<b>B</b> (baseline with one partner variance fixed to 0)*	61.12 ( $p = .06$ )	45	.05	.99	
<b>Actor variances fixed to be equal (A)</b>	64.87 ( $p = .04$ )	47	.05	.99	<b>A – B</b> 3.75 (2) $p > .05$
<b>Partner variances fixed to be equal (P)</b>	64.46 ( $p = .04$ )	46	.05	.98	<b>P – B</b> 3.34 (1) $p > .05$
<b>Relationship variances (same partner) fixed to be equal (R<sub>sp</sub>)</b>	87.62 ( $p = .00$ )	48	.07	.97	<b>R<sub>sp</sub> – B</b> 26.50 (3) $p < .01$
<b>Relationship variances (same partner) fixed to be equal with the exception of one (R<sub>sp2</sub>)</b>	65.02 ( $p = .04$ )	47	.05	.98	<b>R<sub>sp2</sub> – B</b> 3.90 (2) $p > .05$
<b>Relationship variances (same relationship) fixed to be equal (R<sub>sr</sub>)</b>	80.74 ( $p = .00$ )	48	.06	.97	<b>R<sub>sr</sub> – B</b> 19.62 (3) $p < .01$
<b>Relationship variances (same relationship) fixed to be equal with the exception of one (R<sub>sr2</sub>)</b>	63.96 ( $p = .05$ )	47	.05	.99	<b>R<sub>sr2</sub> – B</b> 2.84 (2) $p > .05$

\*The baseline model used for the comparison was (B).

The model with the actor variances equal for the three family members presented a good fit: although the chi square was significant,  $\chi^2(47) = 64.87$ ,  $p = .04$ , the other fit indices were good: RMSEA = .05; NNFI = .99. The comparison between the baseline (Table 3) and the constrained model through the  $\Delta\chi^2$  showed that there were no significant differences between the two models,  $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 3.75$ ,  $p > .05$ . This indicates that the actor variances were equal for the three family members.

The model with the partner variances equal for the three family members presented a good fit; although the chi square was significant,  $\chi^2(46) = 64.46, p = .03$ , the other fit indices were good: RMSEA = .05; NNFI = .98. The comparison between the two models through the  $\Delta\chi^2$  showed that there were no significant differences between them,  $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 3.34; p > .05$ . This shows that partner variances were equal for the three family members.

The equality of relationship effects was tested through the estimation of two separated constrained models. In the first, the relationship variances related to the same partner were forced to be equal. The model presented an acceptable fit; although the chi square was significant,  $\chi^2(48) = 87.62, p = .00$ , the other fit indices were acceptable: RMSEA = .07; NNFI = .97. The comparison between the two models through the  $\Delta\chi^2$  showed that there were significant differences between the models,  $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 26.50; p < .01$ . This suggests that the relationship variances were significantly different in the six relationships considered. The inspection of the baseline model showed a larger difference in the relationship variance between mothers and young adults, who evaluated their relationship with fathers. The model with that relationship variance freed showed an improved fit:  $\chi^2(47) = 65.02, p = .04$ ; RMSEA = .05; NNFI = .98, and was not different from the model without constraints,  $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 3.90, p > .05$ . This means that there were no significant differences in the relationship variances as regards the relationship with the mother and the young adult child, whereas there were significant differences in the relationship variances regarding the relationship with the father. This difference showed that generation had an effect: mothers' perceptions of the relationship with their husbands were more explained by the relationship effect than young adults' perceptions of the relationship with their fathers.

In the second constrained model, the relationship variances related to the same relationship type were forced to be equal. The model with these constraints presented an acceptable fit: although the chi square was significant,  $\chi^2(48) = 80.74, p = .00$ , the other fit indices were acceptable: RMSEA = .06; NNFI = .97. The comparison between the two models through the  $\Delta\chi^2$  showed that there were significant differences between the two models,  $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 19.62, p < .01$ . This indicates that the relationship variances were significantly different in the six relationships considered. The inspection of the baseline model showed a larger difference in the relationship variance between fathers and mothers who evaluate their marital relationship. The model with that relationship variance freed showed an improved fit:  $\chi^2(47) = 63.96, p = .05$ ; RMSEA = .05; NNFI = .99, and was not significantly different from the model without constraints,  $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 2.84; p > .05$ . This means that there were no differences in the relationship variances for scores on the parent-child relationship, whereas there were significant differences in the relationship variances for the marital relationship. This difference showed that gender of parents has an effect on the variance explained by the relationship effect: fathers' perceptions were less explained by the relationship effect than mothers'.

## DISCUSSION

The present research aimed to study the factors that can affect the perception of emotional support within family triads (father, mother, young adult child), in order to know if there is invariance across groups defined by generation and gender differences.

The comparison between the constrained and non-constrained model did not show generation and gender differences in the variance explained by the perceiver and the partner factors. Regarding the perceiver factor, the perception of the three family members is equally affected by the perceiver's stable personal characteristics: some parents and young adult children generally perceive high emotional support from the other family members, whereas other parents and young adult children generally perceive low emotional support. The invariance of the perceiver factor underline the absence of role differences in the individual component of emotional support perceptions within the family. As for the partner factor, findings showed generation and gender invariance. Although in the baseline model some differences among partner factors were noted (the father's partner factor significantly affected the perception of emotional support, whereas the mother's and young adult's partner factor did not), the test of invariance allowed to show that those differences were not significant. Thus, also in this case, there were no role differences.

Because the family factor is a shared factor, it was not possible to test the invariance between generation and gender, whereas some generation and gender differences were found regarding the relationship factors. The mothers' perceptions of emotional support in the marital relationship were more explained by the relationship factor than the young adults' perceptions of emotional support in the father-child relationship. That generation difference is likely more related to the relationship type considered than to the generation itself: mothers were evaluating their marital relationship, whereas young adults were evaluating their relationship with their father. The different family relationship types refer to the hierarchical features which constitute one of the central structural characteristics of the family.

Gender differences related to the relationship factor were also found. Relationship variance of the mothers' perceptions of support in the marital relationship was larger than the relationship variance of the fathers' perceptions in the same relationship. The greater importance of the relationship factor in explaining wives' perception of support could be due to the different information sources used by males and females. Indeed, Gabriel and Gardner (1999) found that women are more likely to attend to relational information when they assess interdependence, whereas men rely mostly on group information. We can argue that the relational uniqueness of marital relationship is a relevant determinant of the wives' support perceptions (Edwards, Nazroo, & Brown, 1998; Gilligan, 1982).

The present study provides new advances in the methodology of interpersonal relationships. The generation and gender invariance analyses within the SRM approach constitute an interesting and innovative application of the model to highlight similarities and differences within a group characterized by plurality (Cigoli & Scabini, 2006). Thus, the statistical procedure presented may be also applied to other relational constructs evaluated through a multi-perspective approach.

Beside the partition of variance in different factors, which has been widely investigated (Branje et al., 2002; Cook, 1994, 2000, 2001, 2005; Cook & Dreyer, 1984; Cook & Kenny, 2004; Delsing, Oud, De Bruyn, & van Aken, 2003; Kahsy & Kenny, 1990; Kenny & La Voie, 1984; Kenny et al., 2006; Lanz et al., 2004), the present study shows how the invariance investigation of the SRM factors sheds light on the structural features of the family group. The findings allow to give some answers regarding the group invariance of the composition of perceived emotional support. In particular, the results highlight that individual family members are embedded in specific relationship types which affect their perceptions. Indeed, significant differences due to the

history of the different relationship types (marital relationship versus parent-child relationship), and not to the individual characteristics of the family members, were found.

Despite the limitation deriving from the fact that the sample selected was not random, the specific analyses used help to more thoroughly understand similarities and differences in the perception of support. However, further study is needed to investigate these issues. More specifically, studies considering other support provisions (Sarason & Sarason, 2009; Wills & Shinar, 2000), or longitudinal studies considering the stability of invariance across time, are necessary to understand the trait-relational-contextual processes underlining the perception of support. Moreover, to better understand the meaning and implications of generation and gender invariance, research investigating the invariance of the influence of the SRM factors on individual and relational outcomes are desirable.

#### NOTES

1. In studies about family support, the contextual factor is considered within the overall family climate that affects the judgment of support. It is termed "family factor."
2. Other authors excluded the estimation of some parameters in their SRM studies with three family members. For instance, Delsing, Oud, De Bruyn, & van Aken (2003) did not estimate either generalized or dyadic reciprocities; and Hsiung and Bagozzi (2003) dropped the family component. The choice of which parameter to exclude depends on the aims of the study.
3. The degree of freedom of chi squared increased because the young adult's partner variance was fixed to 0.

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