Family of Origin Influences on Anxiety, Open Communication, and Relationship Satisfaction*

A Test of Bowenian theory of Anxiety as a Mediator in the Intergenerational Transmission

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Abstract : The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of anxiety in mediating the influence of family of origin characteristics on subsequent relationship processes. Using Bowenian theory as a foundation, this study examined the causal relationships among gender, religion, family of origin-fusion, intimacy, intimidation, personal-trait-anxiety, couple open communication and relationship satisfaction. Results of the path analysis indicated that: (a) gender, religion, family of origin-fusion, and family of origin-intimidation were directly related to personal-trait-anxiety, (b) personal-trait-anxiety was directly related to couple open communication and not related to relationship satisfaction, (c) couple open communication was directly related to relationship satisfaction, and (d) family of origin factors were not directly related to couple open communication and relationship satisfaction; rather, as it was expected, indirect associations, through the mediation of anxiety, were found. The results generally support Bowen's intergenerational process theory, which asserts that anxiety is the mediator of the process. Limitations of the current study and suggestions for further research were discussed.

Key Words : Family of origin, Anxiety, Open Communication, Relationship Satisfaction

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I. INTRODUCTION

Many aspects of human behavior seem to be linked invariably to significant events that transpired in an individual's early years. More often than not, these aspects of human behavior seem to originate in early life experiences within the family environment (Bowen, 1978; Wilcoxon, 1987). In this regard, Bowen stated that the emotional atmosphere, interpersonal relationship patterns and rules of order that characterize relationship within the family in which an individual is reared have been defined as family of origin experiences.

Bowen's model of intergenerational theory seems to be one of the most fully developed and, consequently, has received a great deal of attention. Bowen's model can be classified as one of several theories of intergenerational transmission. Benson, Larson, Wilson, and Demo (1993) suggest that these theories emphasize various mechanisms for transmission, such as genetic contribution to violence, social status inheritance, or psychological process.

However, Bowen's theory is distinct from those approaches in emphasizing emotion as the mechanism of transmission and in conceptualizing the transmission process at both the family and individual levels. The principal emotion that generates the transmission process is anxiety. According to Bowenian theory, relationship processes are expressed through channels of communication (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Bowen's theory suggests that high levels of chronic anxiety are likely to prompt aversive communication and that lower levels of anxiety foster the characteristics associated with open communication. Communication which entails clear, open, and frequent communication processes is regarded as one of the characteristics of healthy and happy couples (Kaslow & Robison, 1996). Relationship satisfaction has usually been linked to the knowledge and use of good communication skills. There has been considerable research supporting the influence of family of origin factors on the functioning of offspring. However, these investigations are insufficient tests of Bowen's theoretical model, which asserts that anxiety is the mediator of the intergenerational transmission process. There have been limited empirical studies to test whether anxiety mediates the influences of family of origin on subsequent relationship processes such as communication style (Benson et al., 1993).

Using Bowenian theory as a foundation, the present research attempts to test the mediation

role of anxiety in couple relationship process. The main purpose of the study is to explore the link among anxiety, couple open communication, and satisfaction in their relationships with others, particularly in serious dating, engagement, cohabitation or marriage.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There has been considerable research supporting the influence of family of origin characteristics on the adjustment of offspring. Family enmeshment has been found to be related to self-consciousness in adolescent (Lapsley, Fitzgerald, Rice, & Jackson, 1989). Intimidation or control dynamics have been found to be negatively associated with self-esteem in adolescents (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986). Previous findings about Bowenian concepts presented in various studies were mainly drawn from adolescents participants (Lopez, 1991). It is in part resulted from the concept that the influence of family of origin factors may decrease as individuals acquire additional relationship experiences. Only recently have Bowenian concepts been applied to life-span relationship.

Some studies based on Korean sample showed that family of origin factors influenced on the romantic relationship (Cha & Chun, 2002; Chun, 2002), psychological well-being of married young adults (Kim & Yoo, 2001) or marital adjustment (Kim & Kim, 1999). Chun (2002) revealed that family of origin factors affected on intimacy among the unmarried couple of early adulthood via anxiety.

According to Bowen, anxiety is a property of both individuals and families. Anxiety in the family as well as in the individual serves to regulate the amount of emotional closeness and distance within the family. If family members experience excessive emotional distance, anxiety increases as a result of fears of rejection and abandonment. Family members then attempt to reduce the anxiety by seeking increased togetherness. On the other hand, if family members experience excessive togetherness, anxiety increases over fears of loss of autonomy and independence. Anxiety over such excessive closeness prompts family members to extend their emotional distance from each other. Anxiety, then, is the mechanism for monitoring and managing emotional distance in the family (Bowen, 1978).

In addition to this regulating function, anxiety is also the mechanism of intergenerational transmission of functional and dysfunctional family patterns. Functional or healthy families have ample tolerance for normal variations in closeness and distance. In dysfunctional families, however, minor variations in closeness or distance frequently arouse anxiety. Moreover, highly intense anxiety and persistent reliance on anxiety to regulate closeness and distance result in chronic anxiety within the family. Because the state of chronic anxiety in the family is stressful, the family seeks to divert, or project, the anxiety onto one or more individuals in order to relieve family level anxiety. Individuals in the family collude in this process by integrating or incorporating the anxiety as part of themselves. To the extent that individuals incorporate or introject the anxiety, they carry the anxiety into subsequent relationships. Thus, through projection and introjection processes, anxiety is transmitted across generations.

In fused families, members are so emotionally reactive that their interactions and responses are nearly automatic. Fusion is the opposite pole from differentiation of self. Fusion refers to how emotionally "stuck together" persons are in relationships. People who have a high level of fusion do not have a clear sense of self as individuals: function in a dependent, emotionally reflexive, semiautomatic, or irrational manner in relationships; and are more likely to develop symptoms in the fact of stress. The level of fusion reflects the degree of unresolved emotional attachment to the family of origin. When the level of family fusion is high, one or more family members usually develop some impairment or symptom (Bray & Williamson, 1987). Bray and Williamson defined intimacy as the ability to be close to another person while maintaining clear boundaries of identity.

A second feature that may heighten the family projection process is triangulation. Triangulation is a process by which a third party, a child for instance, becomes the focus of tension in the marital dyad. Triangulation serves to decrease anxiety within the couple relationship itself, but increases anxiety in the individual who is triangulated (Bowen, 1978).

A third feature that may heighten the family projection process is control or intimidation. Ridged expectations and excessive control by the parents over the child's behavior serve to alleviate the anxiety in the marital dyad, but these control or intimidation processes merely shift the anxiety to the child. Thus, properties of close relationships are transmitted from one

generation to the next. Consequently, relationships with extended family members who do not reside in the home of the original family add further complexity to the notion of sustained influences across generational boundaries (Wilcoxon, 1987). Dysfunction in the marital dyad, for example, has been related to personal anxiety and psychological stress among adolescents (Harvey & Bray, 1991). In sum, overall family dysfunction and family enmeshment have been associated with anxiety (Fine, 1988; Frey & Oppenheimer, 1990).

There is also some support for linking anxiety with difficulties in relationships. Anxiety about separating from the family of origin, for example, has been associated with lower social competence among college students (Kenny & Donaldson, 1991). Two studies (Benson et al., 1993; Larson & Wilson, 1998) found that triangulation in the family of origin was unrelated to anxiety among late adolescents or young adults, whereas fusion and intimidation in the family of origin were associated with higher anxiety. Moreover, Benson et al. (1993) found that fusion and control in the family of origin were related to communication style in romantic relationships of late adolescents. There might be possible connection between anxiety and communication style. Bowen's theory claims that relationship processes are expressed through channels of communication. The theory implies the possibility of two types of communication. One type has aversive properties and includes the tendency to insulate, withdraw, fight, blame, badger, or reject. The other type reflects an open communication style as expressed in the tendency toward cohesive, altruistic, and cooperative communication in relationships in which individuals "listen without reacting emotionally" (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Negative interaction patterns are much more common in the lives of unsatisfied couples (Hahlweg, Revenstorf, & Schindler, 1984).

The key word here is pattern, implying the repetitive nature of their processes. Kaslow and Robison's study (1996) showed that the couples of happy and satisfying relationships reported more effective communication strategies than those in the midrange group, who utilized better strategies than those in the dissatisfied group. The satisfied couples reported a stronger perception of their partners as good listeners, while the other groups conveyed a perceived lack of sharing of feelings by their partners. Instead, the dissatisfied group noted their partner's tendency to "stonewall" (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989), or give them the "silent treatment" when dealing with a problem.

Despite some support to Bowenian theory, there has been relatively little research attention focused on testing Bowen's conceptualization of intergenerational transmission, the process whereby characteristics of the family of origin are replicated in subsequent generations. Few studies have examined Bowen's concept of 'anxiety' as a mediator between family of origin factors and relationship satisfaction nor investigated the mechanism of the intergenerational transmission process of anxiety.

The main purpose of this study is to test the Bowenian theory through examining the causal relationships among variables. In this study, three family of origin factors derived from Bowenian theory and previous studies are included in independent variables; family of origin-fusion, family of origin-intimacy, and family of origin-intimidation.

In addition to family of origin factors, two other background variables are also included in the model to test for their effects; gender and religion. Previous research has shown that these variables are related to personal-trait-anxiety or open communication. Women are more likely to than men to report anxiety (Cox, 1981). On the other hand, many researchers describe religiosity of spirituality as a characteristic of functional families (Fagan, 2000; Kaslow & Robison, 1996; Wilcox, 2002). Kennedy, Cleveland, and Schumm (1981) found that marital happiness was positively correlated with religious commitment. Although there is no consensus regarding the particular aspects of spirituality that are important to optimal functioning in family and individual relations, religiosity needs to be considered as a major variable in this study.

In sum, the following four propositions are tested in evaluating the role of anxiety in mediating the influence of family of origin characteristics on subsequent relationship processes: (a) gender, religion, and family of origin factors (fusion, intimidation, and intimacy) would be related to personal-trait-anxiety and couple open communication, (b) anxiety would be negatively related to couple open communication and relationship satisfaction, (c) couple open communication would be related to relationship satisfaction, and most importantly, (d) family of origin factors-fusion, intimidation, and intimacy are not expected to be strongly directly related to couple open communication and relation satisfaction; rather, indirect associations, through the mediation of anxiety, are expected.

III. METHOD

1. Participants

This study design was based on the 1997 survey data complied by the Relationship Evaluation (RELATE) questionnaire. The participants for this study consisted of 1,708 respondents and the average age of participants was 24.3 years. Because the majority of the participants were college students, about half (45.4%) of all respondents reported their personal yearly income was less than $5,000. The respondents were primarily Caucasian (93.7%), consisted of 50.1% of women and 49.9% of men. Fifty six percent of all the participants were Latter-Day-Saints. The majority of the participants (48.6%) were involved in steady and serious dating, 9.1% were engaged, 26.4% cohabitated, and 15.8% were married.

2. Measures

The RELATE is a tool for people to learn more about the strengths and challenges in their relationships with others, particularly those relationships which may have some permanency like serious dating, engagement, cohabitation or marriage (Doxey & Larson, 1997). Composed of 271 Likert type and categorical questions, the RELATE provides respondent's perception in a relationship in the following areas: Personality characteristics, values, family background experiences, and relationship experiences. This study employed 66 questions from the RELATE scale. The response choices of each question ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

Family of origin-fusion. This scale measures the degree to which a person operates in a fused or individuated manner with parents. The higher the score, the higher the level of fusion (range; 7-35). The scale consists of 7 items with the reliability of .823. The mean score of family of origin-fusion factor was 17.888 (SD = 4.508).

Family of origin-intimacy. This scale consists of 4 items with the reliability of .694. It measures the degree of intimacy and satisfaction with parents. Items on this scale are

answered separately for mother and father. The higher the score, the higher the level of intimacy (range; 4-20). The mean score of family of origin-intimacy factor was 16.605 (SD = 2.832).

Family of origin-intimidation. With the reliability of .666, this scale measures the degree of personal intimidation experienced by an individual relative to his or her parents. The intergenerational intimidation scale included 2 items designed to assess degree of control exerted by parental expectations (range; 2-10). The mean score of family of origin-intimidation factor was 3.402 (SD = 1.526).

Personal-Trait-Anxiety. The Personal-Anxiety-Scale consists of 15 items. Because Bowen never developed an instrument to measure chronic anxiety or operationalized the concepts to his theory (Harris & Busby, 1997), items were selected based on Bowen's chronic anxiety theory and the trait version of Spielberger's State-Trait Anxiety inventory (STAI, 1984). The items referred to having disturbing thoughts, lacking self-confidence, and having feelings of failure, burden, and worry (range; 15-75). The reliability of the scale was .863 and the mean score of personal-trait-anxiety was 32.375 (SD = 6.502).

Couple open communication. This scale consists of 21 items with three factors (mutual understanding, positive feeling, and non-stonewalling). The reliability of the scale was .841. The higher the score, the higher the level of couple communication openness (range; 21-105). The mean score of couple open communication was 80.400 (SD = .082).

Relationship satisfaction. The measure evaluates the level of an individual's satisfaction within a steady dating, engaged, cohabiting, married, or remarried relationship(e.g., how satisfied are you with the physical intimacy you experience?, how satisfied are you with the amount of time together you have?). This scale consists of 7 items and the reliability was .842. The higher the score, the higher the relationship satisfaction (range; 7-35). The mean score of relationship satisfaction was 28.275 (SD =4.482)

3. Data analysis

Path analysis was conducted to examine the causal relationships among gender, religion, family of origin factors, personal-trait-anxiety, couple open communication, and

relationship satisfaction. Three regression equations computed by SPSS were employed for producing the path coefficients.

IV. RESULTS

To explore the relationships between the variables as illustrated in <Table 1>, several multiple regression analyses were conducted. Since all correlations among variables were below .61, multicollinearity was not anticipated (Lewis-Beck, 1980; Pedhazur, 1997).

In the first regression equation of the path model, independent variables-gender, religion, and family of origin factors were regressed on personal-trait-anxiety. <Table 2> showed standardized and unstandardized path coefficients and standard errors for all of the possible relationships in the model. Except for family of origin-intimacy, gender, religion, family of origin-fusion, and family of origin-intimidation showed significant relationships as predictors of personal-trait-anxiety. Females had higher scores of person-trait-anxiety than

<Table 1> Zero-Order Correlations Between Variables used in the Path Model

Variable	PTA	OPENC	RELSAT	RELIG	FOOF	FOO MAC	FOO TMD
Y1: PTA	1.000						
Y2: OPENC	-.396***	1.000					
Y3: RELSAT	-.305***	.608***	1.000				
X1: RELIG	-.123***	.077***	.066***	1.000			
X2: FOOF	.268***	-.209***	-.213***	-.143***	1.000		
X3: FOOMAC	-.166***	.176***	.162***	.137***	-.610***	1.000	
X4: FOOTMD	.199***	-.130***	-.085***	-.130***	.315***	-.271***	1.000
X5: GENDER	.176***	.082***	.003***	-.003***	.024***	.074***	.022***

***p < .001

Note. PTA: personal-trait-anxiety
OPENC: open communication
RELSAT: relationship satisfaction
RELIG: Religion, LDS=1, Non-LDS=0
FOOF: family of origin-fusion
FOOMAC: family of origin-intimacy
FOOTMD: family of origin-intimidation
GENDER: female = 1, male = 0

<Table 2> Standardized (β) and Unstandardized (B) Predictors of Dependent Variables and Standard Errors in the Path Model

	D.V.								
	PTA			OPENC			RELSAT		
I.V.	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
RELIG	-.977	.302	-.085**	.163	.398	.009	.015	.173	.002
FOOF	.304	.042	.210***	-.136	.056	-.069*	-.078	.025	-.080*
FOOMAC	-.012	.067	-.005	.158	.087	.050	.020	.038	.013
FOOTMD	.425	.083	.113***	-.119	.110	-.025	.045	.048	.032
GENDER	2.193	.296	.171***	2.660	.397	.152***	-.281	.175	-.035
PTA				-.533	.032	-.388***	-.034	.015	-.050*
OPENC							.287	.011	.574***
Multiple R			.349			.440			.620
R Square			.121			.193			.384

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Note. RELIG: Religion, LDS=1, Non-LDS=0 FOOF: family of origin-fusion
FOOMAC: family of origin-intimacy FOOTMD: family of origin-intimidation
GENDER: female = 1, male = 0 PTA: personal-trait-anxiety
OPENC: open communication RELSAT: relationship satisfaction

males (β = .171, p < .001). Also, the participants who were affiliated with Latter-Day-Saint showed lower scores of personal-trait-anxiety than those who were non-LDS (β = -.085, p < .01). As expected, gender and religion were significantly related to personal-trait-anxiety.

In the second regression analysis, open communication was the dependent variable. The independent variables included all independent variables used in the first regression plus personal-trait-anxiety. In this regression analysis, gender (β = .152, p < .001) and personal-trait-anxiety (β = -.388, p < .001) were significant predictors of open communication. Family of origin factors were not significantly related to open communication. The fact that the strongest predictor was personal-trait-anxiety indicated the mediating role of personal-trait-anxiety between family of origin factors and couple open communication. In the final regression analysis, relationship satisfaction was the dependent variable. The independent variables included all independent variables used in the second regression plus open

communication.

After the series of regression analyses, the trimmed model was constructed with statistically significant ($p < .01$) variables. All significant direct path coefficients were shown in the trimmed path model (see Figure). In sum, gender, religion, family of origin-fusion and family of origin-intimidation directly predicted personal-trait-anxiety. And gender and personal-trait-anxiety directly predicted couple open communication. Relationship satisfaction was directly predicted by only couple open communication.

One of the important advantages of path analysis was that it enabled researchers to decompose the path coefficients into direct and indirect effects. <Table 3> showed the decomposition of total effects into direct and indirect effects, whereas the <Figure> of trimmed model indicated only the direct effects. This study used a method developed by Alwin and Hauser (1975) to decompose the total effects.

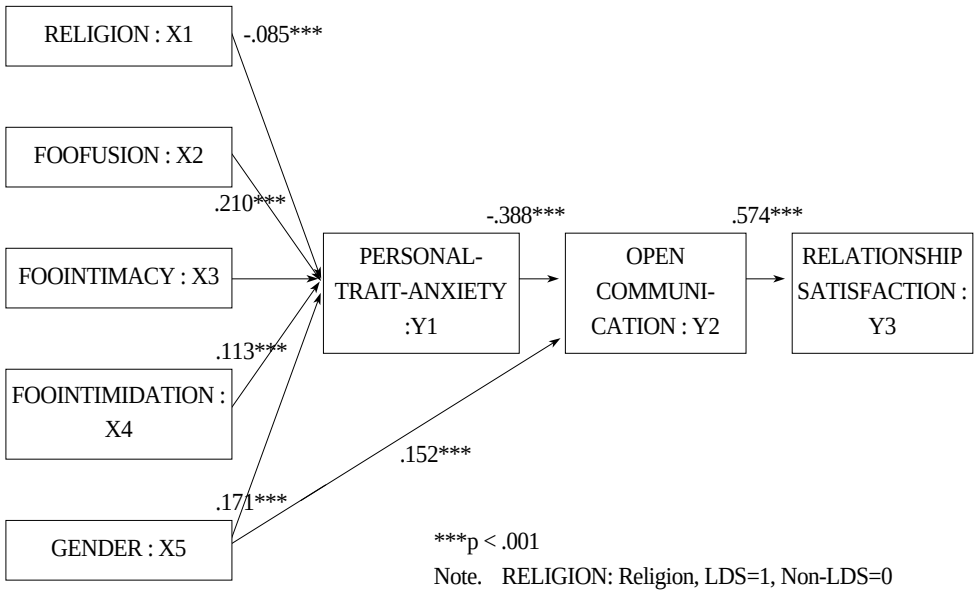
Results showed that there were several direct and indirect effects. Gender, religion, family of origin-fusion and family of origin-intimacy were directly related to person-trait-anxiety. In addition, gender was directly related to open communication. Females showed the

<Table 3> Standardized Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects on Criterion Variables

	D.V.						
	PTA	OPENC			RELSAT		
I.V.	D.E.	D.E.	I.E.	T.E.	D.E.	I.E.	T.E.
X1: RELIG	-.085***	NS	.033	.033	NS	.027	.027
X2: FOOF	.210***	NS	-.081	-.081	NS	-.099	-.099
X3: FOOMAC	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
X4: FOOTMD	.113***	NS	-.044	-.044	NS	-.031	-.031
X5: GENDER	.171***	.152***	-.066	.086	NS	.040	.040
Y1: PTA		-.388***		-.388	-.054*	-.223	-.277
Y2: OPENC					.574***		.574

***p < .001

Note. RELIG: Religion, LDS=1, Non-LDS=0 FOOF: family of origin-fusion
FOOMAC: family of origin-intimacy FOOTMD: family of origin-intimidation
GENDER: female = 1, male = 0 PTA: personal-trait-anxiety
OPENC: open communication RELSAT: relationship satisfaction



<Figure> Path diagram: Trimmed model of family of origin influences on relationship satisfaction

higher level of open communication than males. Personal-trait-anxiety showed strong direct relations to only open communication not relation satisfaction.

In summary, these results provide that: (a) gender, religion, family of origin-fusion, and family of origin-intimidation were directly related to personal-trait-anxiety. Also, only gender was directly related to open communication, (b) personal-trait-anxiety was directly related to open communication and not directly related to relationship satisfaction, (c) couple communication was directly related to relationship satisfaction, and (d) family of origin factors-fusion and intimidation were not directly related to couple communication and relationship satisfaction; rather, as it was expected, an indirect association, through the mediation of anxiety, was found (see figure).

V. DISCUSSION

The results of path analysis indicated that family of origin-fusion and family of origin-intimidation were associated with higher personal-trait-anxiety. Also, consistent with previous research, the results showed that women had higher personal-trait-anxiety than men. Interestingly, participants of Latter-Day-Saint showed lower personal-trait-anxiety. Given the fact that non-LDS group included other religious affiliations, such as Catholic and Protestant, particular spirituality in LDS participants may contribute to lower level of personal-trait-anxiety. The impact of religiosity may be stronger among members of LDS than those of any other religious groups (Kosmin & Lachman, 1993). Probably, LDS participants have more likely been taught that shared faith in God can bind couple together in a commitment to common values. Because the doctrine of LDS emphasizes strong family value, mutual trust, prayer, repentance, and forgiveness (Hinckley, 1995), it may lend LDS church attendants strength to overcome difficulties (e.g., anxiety) that might otherwise damage their relationships. Also, it might be the factor for explaining lower anxiety level of LDS members that LDS encourages family or couple recreational activities such as vacations, games, outings, hobbies, and the like. Couples or families that play together can not only have fun but also draw closer together. More research is needed to explain this finding.

On the other hand, women showed both higher scores of anxiety as well as higher scores of communication openness. This results need to be speculated because personal-trait-anxiety and open communication are contradictory in nature. There might be more complex process between women's anxiety and communication.

The trimmed path model showed the pattern expected. Relationship satisfaction is significantly affected by open communication, while open communication is powerfully affected by personal-trait-anxiety. This flow results in the understanding that family of origin factors toward personal-trait-anxiety, in turn, personal-trait-anxiety has an effect on couple's open communication.

In addition, fusion and intimidation in the family of origin were only directly related to personal-state-anxiety. In accordance with Bowenian theory, anxiety mediated the effects of fusion and intimidation in the family of origin on relationships. The findings provide partial

confirmation and suggest several extensions to Bowen's theory of intergenerational transmission. Another significant finding of this study is the lack of relationship between family of origin-intimacy and personal-trait-anxiety. It indicated that other factors contribute to the process. Otherwise, there might be some conceptual mistake in the course of constructing scales.

This study provides an empirical test of central tenet of Bowenian theory. The findings suggest that Bowen's model depicting anxiety as a mediator in intergenerational transmission is most applied to fusion and intimidation and not applied for intimacy in the family of origin. Future research that examines the contributions of anxiety across the adult life-span could ascertain whether the relative contributions of the family of origin decrease or become more salient as a function of marital or parental roles. By evaluating anxiety in the current relationship process and the family of origin, productive transmission dynamics can foster and nonproductive ones can be interrupted. As Benson et al. (1993) suggested, for both theoretical and clinical reasons, then, insight about emotional mechanisms serves to broaden the knowledge bas beyond cognitive and behavioral approaches and to advance a more complete understanding of processes within families and across generations.

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