

This Week's Citation Classic

Bell R Q. A reinterpretation of the direction of effects in studies of socialization. Psychol. Rev. 75:81-95, 1968. [Child Research Branch, Natl. Inst. Mental Health, Rockville, MD]

The effects of children on parents can no longer be dismissed as a logical but implausible interpretation of nondirectional associations found between parent and child behaviors. A model for explaining existing findings as due to child effects is presented. [The Social Sciences Citation Index® (SSCI™) indicates that this paper has been cited over 170 times since 1968.]

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March 30, 1981

"It was in a teasing and provocative mood that I set out to write this paper for presentation at a conference on socialization in 1964, one that would be attended by some of the leading scientists who had spent their entire careers studying correlations between child and parent behaviors in order to find evidence of parent effects on children. For each of the few consistent correlations that had come out of over 40 years of research, I supplied a plausible explanation consisting of an effect of children on parents. I was completely surprised at the response to my paper when it was presented. Instead of setting off a wave of criticism and rebuttal, I received very favorable reactions, comments to the effect that the corrective viewpoint was long overdue.

"The paper was held up for three years waiting for a book on the conference to

materialize. I finally withdrew it and sent it to the Psychological Review. I expected a bitter battle with reviewers, but the paper was quickly accepted with only minimal changes. By that time it had undergone several revisions as a result of reactions from many colloquium audiences. I had put the hypotheses into the context of a model which would accommodate parents' expectations for their children, their values, and attitudes. The model would explain a lot of existing findings, and later generated new hypotheses,¹ research designs,² and a way of accommodating reciprocal effects.³

"At the time I submitted that first paper the model was just beginning to convince me too! It was no longer a logical exercise. However, even I had been subject to the extreme and illogical cultural compulsion of American psychology to see the environment as all powerful (in this case, the parents). Thus I needed the three year delay to perfect my argument, and time to reassure myself that I was right. The environmentalism was illogical because it caused us to overlook the fact that the child is a potent part of the environment for the parent!

"The paper came out at a time when there was dissatisfaction with the existing unproductive approach. The typical expedient study had consisted in identifying children with different characteristics, then interviewing or observing their parents in order to see what they had done to produce these characteristics. The field was ready to move on with the more difficult task of experimentally altering or in other ways varying parent and child behavior to test hypotheses in a more definitive way. It is this which accounts for the paper's frequent citation."

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1. Bell R Q & Harper L V. Child effects on adults. New York: Halsted Press, 1977. 253 p.
 2. Bell R Q. Parent, child, and reciprocal influences: new experimental approaches (introduction to a symposium). J. Abnormal Child Psychol. In press, 1981.
 3., Parent, child, and reciprocal influences. Amer. Psychol. 34:821-6, 1979.