

Interparental Conflict and Children's Outcomes: The Pros and Cons of Silence

As parental conflict has been the focus of research for a number of family psychologists for some decades, an imposing body of evidence has been amassed documenting its adverse effects on children. Acrimonious parental disagreements have been linked with children's behavioural problems (e.g., aggression, hostility, antisocial and health risky behaviours), emotional problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, withdrawal), as well as lowered social competence and academic achievement (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Harold, Fincham, Osborne & Conger, 1997; Harold, Shelton, Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2004). Particularly destructive and harmful to children appear to be conflicts involving physical and verbal aggression between parents and conflicts that are frequent, intense and child-related. Children witnessing the latter may experience guilt and ascribe the blame for parental disharmony to themselves to the detriment of their wellbeing (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Cummings, Davies & Campbell, 2000).

Apart from a direct effect of parental conflict on children through witnessing an argument, conflicts between parents may spill over to children in the form of increased parental hostility, preoccupation and diminished emotional availability (Erel & Burman, 1995). Moreover, lengthy and frequent disagreements may result in a general deterioration of parenting practices.

Research shows that couples choose from a number of strategies they have at their disposal when involved in a conflict (Klein & Johnson, 2002). Indeed, in our qualitative study (Kielpekowski & Pryor, in press), parents reported that in order to protect children from witnessing aggressive disagreement they opted for a type of conflict that was neither physical nor verbal, but instead involved silence, withdrawal and avoidance of partner. For parents this form of confrontation appeared to be a

preferable and benign alternative that not only protected children but also prevented parents from a perceived 'loss of face' in the eyes of the offspring.

This 'silent' conflict (Pryor & Pattison, 2007; Kielpikowski & Pryor, in press) has thus far been under researched although indications of detrimental effects on children of parental withdrawal from each other, nonverbal hostility and avoidance may be found in a handful of studies (e.g., De Arth-Pendley & Cummings, 2002; Tschann, Flores, Pasch & Marin, 1999; Goeke-Morey, Cummings, Harold & Shelton, 2003; Wild & Richards, 2001). Despite using diverse methods and participants from different age groups the cited research eloquently signals that nonverbal hostility and withdrawal by a parent in a conflict situation appear to be as distressing to children as heated verbal exchanges between parents.

The dearth of research on silent conflict combined with the suggestions of compromised children's outcomes provided an impetus for my doctoral research. In this paper I report some of the findings from the first wave of data collection for this research involving multiple informants' assessments of silent parental conflict, family relationships and children's psychological wellbeing by members of 135 families.

The paper focuses on the following three research objectives:

1. To compare mothers', fathers' and young people's assessments of:
 - family functioning
 - parental warmth and hostility towards children
 - young people's psychological adjustment
2. To test two broad hypotheses focusing on the children's perspective
 - Family functioning will influence the negative effect of silent parental conflict on young people's wellbeing.
 - Parental warmth and hostility will influence the negative effect of silent parental conflict on young people's wellbeing.

3. To propose and test an explanatory model of the effects of silent parental conflict on children's wellbeing.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited using multiple methods, namely: snowballing from established contacts and advertising via community noticeboards and flyers dropped off in letterboxes in Wellington. Additionally, notices were placed in school newsletters in a number of regions in New Zealand.

Participants were 135 families consisting of two partners and a child aged between 12 and 16 years living in one household. No restrictions were placed on the length of parental partnership, family structure or the relationship to the child. In the sample 118 couples were married, 248 adults were parents and in 82% of participating families there were two or more children. Average couple relationship length was 19.97 years (SD = 6.60). There were 69 boys and 66 girls in the sample; average age of the young people was 14.38 years (SD = 1.26). The ethnic composition overrepresented the majority ethnicity (85% of New Zealand Europeans) and the above average level of education (45% of parents with university degree or higher), and may be attributed to the self-selection process of the sample.

Measures

Families completed comprehensive pen and pencil questionnaires sent and received by mail. Cronbach's alphas for the scales described below are in Table 1; all scales demonstrated appropriate reliability.

Silent Parental Conflict Parents and children completed respective diagnostic subscales of the Silent Parental Conflict measures. Both the parents' and the adolescents' scales have been newly developed as a result of our qualitative studies (Kielpekowski & Pryor, in press; Pryor & Pattison, 2007). The parents' scale consists of eight items scored on a Likert scale from one to five, and the children's scale of

seven items is scored on a Likert scale from one to four. Higher scores represent higher levels of silent conflict.

Whole Family Functioning Children and adults reported family cohesion using the subscale of FACES III (Olson, 1986), a ten-item instrument using a one to five Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting greater family cohesion. Communication problems were measured with a nine item Communication subscale of the McMaster Family Assessment Device (Epstein, Baldwin, & Bishop, 1983). The scale is scored from one to four and higher scores reflect greater problems.

Parent – Child Relations Adapted Warmth and Hostility subscales from the Iowa Youth and Family Project (Melby, Conger, Ge, & Warner, 1995) were used by adults to report how they related to their children, and by children to report on each parent's behaviour separately. In this study we used four hostility items and five warmth items scored from one to seven on a Likert scale. Higher scores represented greater warmth and greater hostility.

Children's Psychological Adjustment Wellbeing was conceptualised in a twofold way, namely as a level of dysfunction and a level of positive functioning (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Keyes, Shmotkin & Ryff, 2002). According to this approach, low levels of psychological problems on their own are not sufficient to assert an individual's psychological wellbeing. The Strengths and Difficulties (SDQ) questionnaire (Goodman, Meltzer, & Bailey, 1998) was used by children and parents to report children's adjustment problems (i.e., hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, conduct problems and peer problems). The Total Difficulties score is computed using 20 items rated from zero to two, with higher scores indicating greater problems.

To measure positive functioning children answered the Future Outlook scale I newly developed for the study. It is derived from the premise that for adolescents to have positive expectations of the future and to envision future as appealing indicates positive functioning. This conceptualisation has its roots in the work of Taylor and

Brown (1988; 1994), who propose that positively biased perceptions of self and the world are beneficial to wellbeing, and in Elkind's (1967; 1985) concept of the 'personal fable', a tendency of adolescents to perceive their own lives as special, and laden with unique meaning. The scale consists of seven items scored from one to five on a Likert scale with higher scores signifying more positive outlook.

Results

Means and standard deviations for the variables of interest are presented in Table 1. Perceptions of family members were compared where appropriate. Paired samples t-tests were computed for parent-child relations reports of parents and adolescents and for parental silent conflict reports by adults.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and internal reliability coefficients.

Variable	<u>Fathers</u>		<u>Mothers</u>		<u>Adolescents</u>	
	M (SD)	α	M (SD)	α	M (SD)	α
Cohesion	M=39.00 (5.34)	.87	M=40.20 (5.17)	.86	M=36.59 (5.96)	.85
Communication Problems	M=19.38 (3.40)	.77	M=17.66 (3.13)	.75	M=20.12 (3.57)	.71
Children's Total Difficulties	M= 8.80 (5.96)	.85	M = 7.69 (5.07)	.81	M=10.24 (4.96)	.77
Mother's Hostility to Child			M=11.26 (3.67)	.84	M=12.08 (4.34)	.79
Father's Hostility to Child	M=10.86 (3.62)	.85			M=11.32 (4.07)	.88
Mother's Warmth to Child			M=13.88 (5.77)	.90	M=14.50 (5.86)	.88
Father's Warmth to Child	M14.89 (5.08)	.92			M=14.20 (5.85)	.88
Parental Silent Conflict – Adults' Reports	M=12.57 (3.29)	.88	M=12.39 (3.34)	.90		
Parental Silent Conflict – Children's Reports					M=11.87 (3.76)	.81
Future Outlook					M=30.59 (3.93)	.84

No significant differences were found in the levels of warmth and hostility towards children reported by fathers and mothers, nor were significant differences

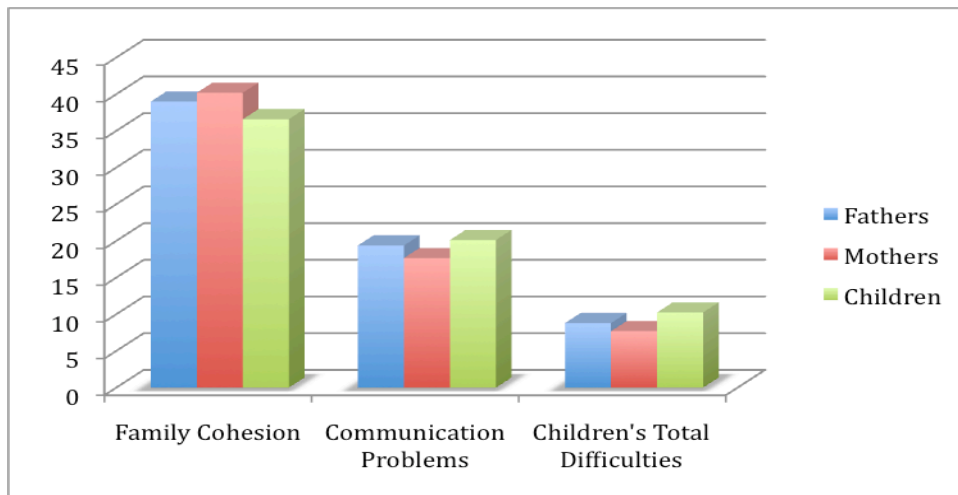
found between children's assessments of mothers and fathers on warmth and on hostility directed towards them. No significant differences were found between parents' and children's reports of parental warmth towards the child and of father's hostility towards the child, however children reported significantly higher mother's hostility towards them than did mothers ($t=2.08$, $df = 134$, $p < .05$). There was no significant difference on the levels of silent conflict reported by men and women.

As data of family members should not be treated as independent, a repeated measures design was employed for analyses. A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to compare scores on adolescents' Total Difficulties measure obtained from mothers, fathers and children. A significant effect was found for the participant's role in the family: Wilks' $\lambda = .82$, $F(2,133)=15.07$, $p < .001$, multivariate partial eta squared = .19 (indicating a large effect size according to Cohen's [1988] criteria). Using the same method, significant effects for the role in the family were found when comparing family members' scores on family cohesion (Wilks' $\lambda = .73$, $F(2,133)=24.17$, $p < .001$, multivariate partial eta squared = .27) and communication problems (Wilks' $\lambda = .72$, $F(2,133)=26.60$, $p < .001$, multivariate partial eta squared = .28). Means are represented graphically in Figure 1. Pairwise comparisons indicated that family members differed significantly from one another on their assessments of family functioning and children's adjustment problems.

Hypotheses testing

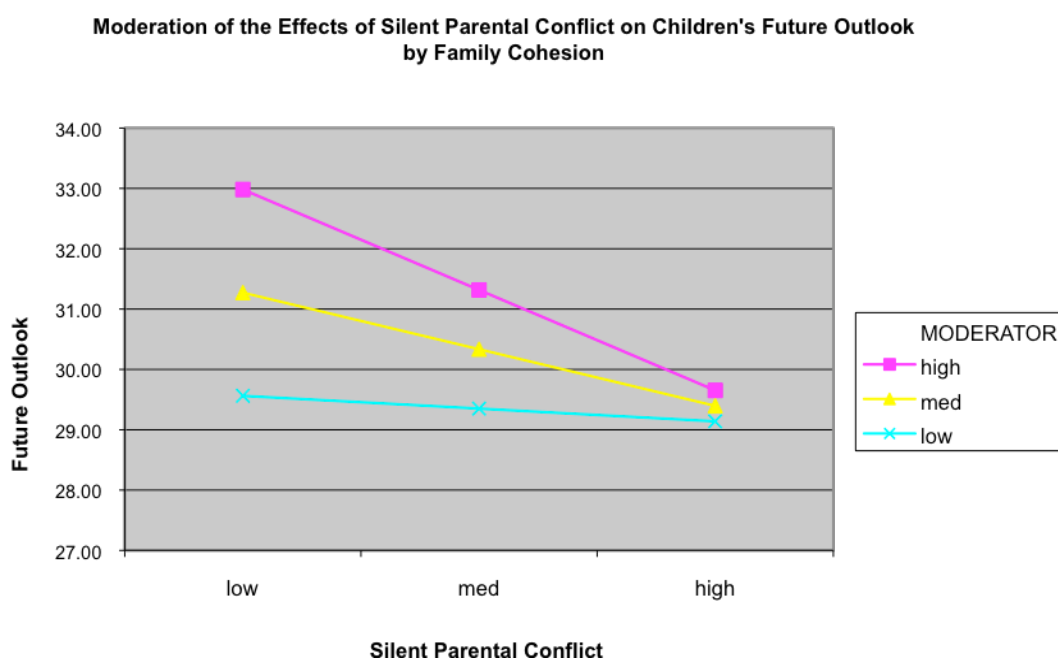
In this study family cohesion and lack of expressiveness were conceptualised as context variables, fairly stable and characteristic of each family. They were hypothesised to act as moderators on the influence of silent parental conflict on children's wellbeing, represented by total difficulties and future outlook variables. Hierarchical regressions were conducted to establish the presence of interactions between family cohesion and silent conflict and communication problems and silent

Figure1. Mean comparison of the assessments of family functioning and children's psychological adjustment by source (fathers, mothers and children).



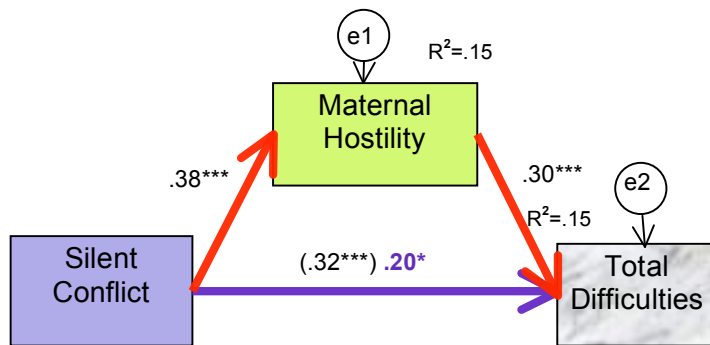
conflict. Family cohesion was found to moderate the association between parental silent conflict and adolescents' future outlook. The results of the moderation analysis (see Figure 2) indicate that family cohesion made little difference to children's future outlook scores when parental silent conflict was high, however higher future outlook was associated with lower silent conflict under the condition of higher family cohesion.

Figure2.



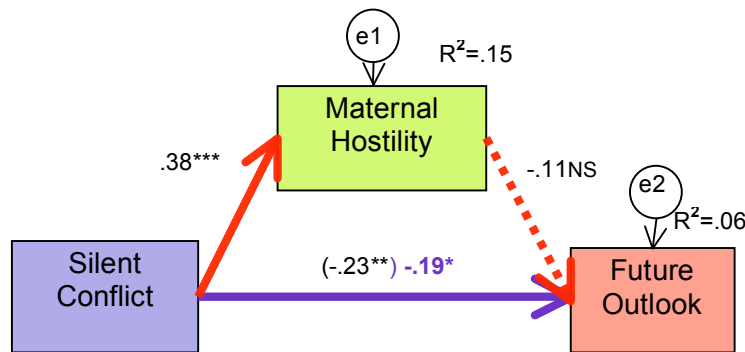
The second hypothesis was conceived as a statistical mediation. It was hypothesised that silent conflict between parents will not only have a direct effect on children’s wellbeing, but that it will also affect it indirectly by influencing parental warmth and hostility towards the child. Thus, warmth and hostility of each parent were expected to act as statistical mediators. Mediation necessitates that the variables under investigation be significantly correlated, however when tested, only maternal hostility was found to significantly correlate with the silent conflict and the wellbeing variables. Path models were built using AMOS 6.0 (Arbuckle, 2005) to test the mediating effects of maternal hostility and are shown in Figures 3 and 4.

Figure 3. Path diagram representing mediation of the effects of silent parental conflict on total difficulties by maternal hostility.



The effect of silent parental conflict on children’s total difficulties was partially mediated by maternal hostility. The original path coefficient for direct effect of silent conflict on total difficulties decreased from .32, $p < .001$ to .20, $p < .05$ when the mediator was introduced. Sobel’s t-test yielded a value of 2.64, $p < .01$.

Figure 4. Path diagram representing mediation of the effects of silent parental conflict on future outlook by maternal hostility.

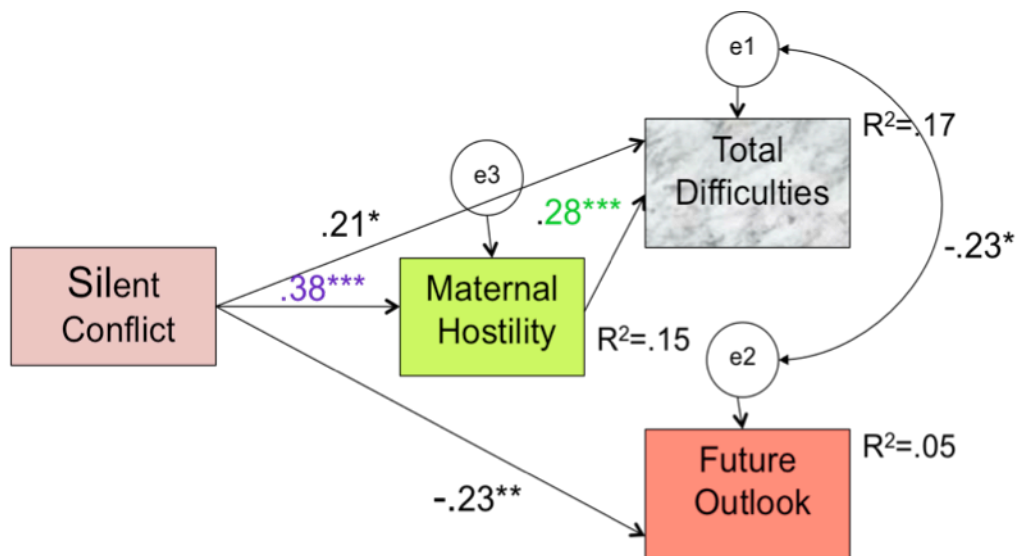


Introduction of the mediating variable reduced the silent conflict to future outlook path coefficient from $-.23, p < .01$ to $-.19, p < .05$, however the path from maternal hostility to future outlook became not significant. This implies that although maternal hostility was affected by silent conflict and played a role in the captured process, it did not act as a mediator.

The final objective of this study was to propose and test an explanatory model of the investigated processes by integrating the findings. The resulting model (see Figure 5) incorporates the two previous models and captures the effects of silent parental conflict on children's outcomes with a simultaneous inclusion of the dual measurement of wellbeing.

The results of the analyses largely support the posed hypotheses. Adolescents who experienced higher silent parental conflict reported lower future expectations and greater psychological difficulties. The link between silent conflict and total difficulties was significantly partially mediated by children's reports of higher hostility they experienced from mothers. This indirect effect of silent conflict on total difficulties is $.106, p < .001$.

Figure 5. Integrated path model of the effects of silent parental conflict on children’s wellbeing mediated by mother’s hostility to child – adolescents’ perspective.



According to the accepted guidelines (Byrne, 2001) the obtained model fits the data well with $\chi^2(1, N = 135) = .25, p = .246, \chi^2/df \text{ ratio} = 1.347, CFI = .99, NFI = .98, GFI = .99, AGFI = .95,$ and $RMSEA = .051.$

Discussion

Bearing in mind the cross-sectional nature of the described data, the following conclusions ensue from the analyses. Adolescents in this study reported their perceptions of family functioning and their own psychological problems more negatively than did their parents. This result may mean that young people perceive more problems and are less satisfied with the family than their parents may believe them to be. On the other hand it may be a result of the adolescents’ propensity for hypothetical thinking and the associated criticism of reality (Berger, 2005). The young participants also appeared to have somewhat different relationships with mothers than with fathers, as maternal (not paternal) hostility mediated the relationship between silent parental conflict and psychological problems according to

children's reports. They also rated mothers as significantly more hostile than did the mothers themselves.

Importantly, and in keeping with the qualitative research of Pryor and Pattison (2007), the current findings indicate that silent parental conflict affected children's wellbeing even though its reported levels were low according to all family members. Moreover, it appears that it affected both the domain of children's psychological wellbeing and of 'ill-being'.

A general consensus among social scientists and practitioners is that conflict is a human interaction that is both inevitable and normal. Therefore, despite the evidence of its negative effects for children, it is necessary to accept that parental conflict cannot be eradicated. Instead, concerted efforts of researchers, parents, practitioners and policy makers need to focus on determining what constitutes a well-managed conflict. Additionally, as parents provide behavioural models for children (Bandura, 1977), skilful management of marital disagreements by parents may prove beneficial for children's own experiences of conflict.

So, on the basis of the presented evidence, are we able to say that silent conflict fits the bill? According to the opinions expressed by parents in my qualitative study (Kielpikowski & Pryor, in press) this type of conflict offered the advantages of containing aggression, preserving 'face' in front of the children, and providing an opportunity to take the time out of the argument to calm the emotions and evaluate the disagreement. These are the pros. On the other hand, the same adults reported significant emotional costs of silent conflict to themselves, whereas the research discussed earlier showed that even at a low level silent conflict between parents impacted on children's wellbeing. It may be important for parents to be aware that young people are not oblivious to parental silent conflicts and that children's wellbeing appears to be compromised not only by the direct experience of such

conflicts but also by their perceptions of associated maternal hostility directed at them. Due to the newness of the concept under investigation, this research is largely exploratory and numerous questions remain to be answered before more complete explanations can be put forward. Multiple informant models and longitudinal analyses forming the next step of the study are expected to provide a robust set of interpretable evidence.

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