



Marital conflict

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Do adolescents respond differently to marital conflict in the family according to whether or not the conflict involves them? Are they able to distinguish between constructive and destructive marital conflict? Researchers from the University of Queensland Family Centre discuss their recent study that used an analogue methodology to explore adolescents' reactions to marital conflict.

Conflict is a pervasive feature of family life that can have beneficial or harmful effects depending on how it is expressed and how effectively it is resolved (Noller and Fitzpatrick 1993). We were interested in exploring adolescents' reactions to marital conflict, using an analogue study where adolescents and their parents listened to a series of specially prepared tapes of marital conflict, and then responded to a series of questions about those tapes and their reactions to them.

This type of analogue study has been used frequently with children, particularly by Cummings and his colleagues (Cummings, Ianotti and Zahn-Waxler 1985; Cummings, Pellegrini, Notarius and Cummings 1989; Cummings, Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow 1981). These researchers showed that children exposed to an angry interaction between adults responded with distress and/or aggressive behaviour, and that they became even more distressed when these angry interactions between adults were experienced frequently or involved physical violence, as well as when the conflict remained unresolved. However, given

that this type of study had not been used with adolescents, it was not clear how they would respond in such a situation.

In their discussion of the effects of marital conflict on children, Grych and Fincham (1990; 1993) raise some important issues that require further research. These include whether children respond differently to conflicts that are child-related from those that are not, and to conflicts that are dealt with constructively and those that are dealt with destructively. A further important issue is whether or not it makes a difference if the children see the resolution of the conflict.

In assessing this sample of families with adolescents, we were interested in exploring some of these issues and answering such questions as: Can adolescents distinguish between constructive and destructive conflict interactions? Do they see some styles of conflict as being more likely to be resolved than others? Which conflict styles do they see as typical of their own parents? What emotions do they experience during such conflicts? And what would they be likely to do if the conflict actually occurred in their own home?



and adolescents

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The analogue study

Participants in the *Marital Conflict and Adolescents Analogue Study* were from 55 intact families with at least two adolescent children between the ages of 12 and 16. Two parents and one adolescent child from each family participated. Twenty-nine of the adolescents were males and 26 were females, and their average age was 13.5 years. The families were recruited through public and private schools, and through newspaper advertisements.

A set of eight audiotapes, all pre-tested to ensure that they fitted the appropriate categories, were used in the study. Half the tapes involved a child-related issue (the adolescent's untidy room) and the other half involved a marital issue (husband and wife sharing the housework).

Four different styles of conflict, based on the literature on marital conflict (Christensen 1988; Christensen and Heavey 1990; Noller and White 1990), were represented. These were: first, a 'coercive' style where partners verbally attacked one another (blaming the other and defending their own position); second, a 'wife demands – husband withdraws' style (where the wife demands more help from the husband and he doesn't want to discuss the issue); third, a 'husband demands – wife withdraws' style (where the husband is demanding change and his wife doesn't want to discuss the issue); and, fourth, a 'mutual' style (where the spouses listened to each other's point of view and responded with understanding). All of the conflicts ended at a similar point – with no resolution of the issue.

Family members also completed the Conflict Resolution Styles Questionnaire (Rands, Levinger and

Mellinger 1981) as modified by Peterson (1990). This measure includes three factors of four items each: 'Fight' (attack or act aggressively or coercively); 'Avoid' (refuse to discuss the issue or deny that there is an issue); and 'Mutual' (listen and try to understand each other's point of view). Participants report on the behaviour of the other person in the conflict (spouse and child for parents; parents and sibling for children), rather than on their own behaviour, based on the belief that they are likely to be able to report more objectively on that person's behaviour than on their own.

All three family members listened to the tapes and rated them in terms of how typical the interaction was of interactions in their own families, how stressful they were to listen to, how likely it was that the conflict would be resolved, and the positive and negative emotions they experienced in listening to the adults arguing. All ratings were made on 6-point scales. For ratings of positive emotion, three scales (happy, satisfied and comfortable) were summed to give scores out of 18, and for ratings of negative emotion, five scales (angry, sad, worried, ashamed and helpless) were summed to give scores out of 30. For the Conflict Resolutions Styles Questionnaire, participants received scores for each of the three scales, as described earlier.

Results

Ratings of typicality, stressfulness, likelihood of resolution, and positive and negative emotions were analysed to explore the question of whether such factors as the type of conflict (child-related or not), which family member was reporting (mother, father or adolescent), and the style of

conflict being presented on the tape (coercive, wife demands, husband demands, and mutual), had an impact on these ratings.

Typicality

Mothers, fathers and adolescents tended to indicate that the mutual style was the most typical style in their own families, and that the wife demands style was more typical than the other negative styles (Table 1). It is interesting to note, however, that the adolescents saw the mutual style as less typical than their parents did.

The fact that the mutual style was seen as more typical than the negative styles suggests that, in general, these families were not highly conflicted.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for typicality ratings by type of conflict, reporter and conflict style

Type of conflict	Child-related			Non child-related		
	Adolescent	Mother	Father	Adolescent	Mother	Father
Coercion	2.02 (1.41)	2.04 (1.52)	2.02 (1.35)	1.93 (1.50)	1.79 (1.34)	1.89 (1.41)
Dad demands	2.00 (1.30)	1.74 (1.23)	1.76 (1.24)	1.62 (1.16)	1.55 (1.28)	1.72 (1.29)
Mum demands	2.32 (1.57)	2.45 (1.73)	2.32 (1.45)	2.25 (1.47)	2.62 (1.63)	2.49 (1.61)
Mutual	3.13 (1.43)	3.40 (1.52)	3.66 (1.57)	2.79 (1.38)	3.21 (1.47)	3.40 (1.49)

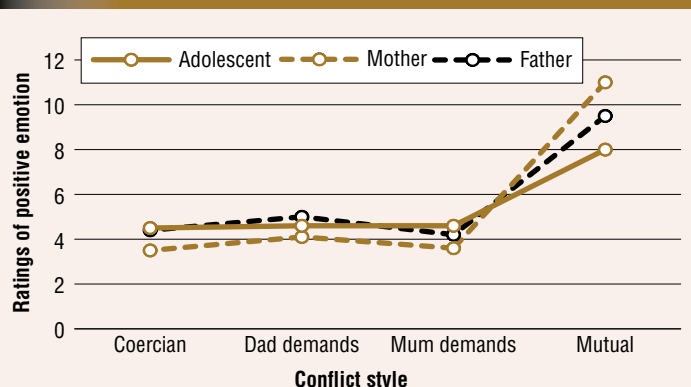
Note: Ratings are on a single 6-point scale.
Source: Marital Conflict and Adolescents Analogue Study, University of Queensland, 2000.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for ratings of stressfulness by type of conflict, reporter and conflict style

Type of conflict	Child-related			Non child-related		
	Adolescent	Mother	Father	Adolescent	Mother	Father
Coercion	2.27 (1.62)	2.96 (1.87)	2.96 (1.60)	2.56 (1.78)	3.12 (1.87)	2.71 (1.61)
Dad demands	2.31 (1.69)	2.50 (1.49)	2.79 (1.66)	2.35 (1.64)	2.46 (1.49)	2.75 (1.52)
Mum demands	2.04 (1.31)	2.65 (1.84)	2.87 (1.59)	1.92 (1.34)	2.37 (1.56)	2.48 (1.45)
Mutual	1.40 (0.80)	1.64 (0.93)	2.02 (1.23)	1.39 (0.95)	1.44 (0.73)	1.90 (1.11)

Note: Ratings are on a single 6-point scale.
Source: Marital Conflict and Adolescents Analogue Study, University of Queensland, 2000.

Figure 1. Interaction of type of conflict and reporter for child-related conflicts, four ratings of positive emotions



Source: Marital Conflict and Adolescents Analogue Study, University of Queensland, 2000.

The more negative views of the adolescents is in line with other studies showing that adolescents tend to express more negative views of their families than their parents do. The finding that the wife demands style was seen as more typical than the other negative styles is consistent with work on sex differences in the demand/withdraw pattern in marriage (Christensen 1988; Christensen and Heavey 1990), with women seen as more likely to be the demanders in this type of interaction, and men more likely to be the withdrawers.

Stressfulness

Family members reacted differently to different styles of conflict. The coercive tapes were experienced as more stressful than other styles, and the mutual tapes were experienced as less stressful. The ability of family members to select one style as more stressful than the others shows that they were able to distinguish between them. In addition, fathers found most of the taped interactions more stressful than other family members, a finding which fits with work by Gottman and Levenson (1988) suggesting that men find conflict highly stressful (Table 2). Given that mean ratings of stressfulness were generally less than the midpoint of 3, it is clear that none of the tapes was highly stressful. Of course, we would expect that, if the interactions were actually occurring in their own homes, family members would experience more stress.

Likelihood of resolution

Mutual conflicts were seen as more likely to be resolved than other conflicts, and adolescents were generally more optimistic about the likelihood of resolution than other family members (Table 3). The fact that the mutual style was seen as more likely to be resolved suggests that the mutual interactions on the tapes were clearly more constructive than the interactions involving the negative styles. In addition, it seems clear that family members were able to discriminate constructive from destructive conflicts.

The wife demands style was seen as more likely to be resolved than the other negative styles. Given that family members are more used to this type of conflict, they are also more optimistic about these conflicts moving to a resolution. However, it should be noted that adolescents were more optimistic about the likelihood of a resolution, regardless of conflict style.

It is not clear why adolescents would be more optimistic than other family members about the likelihood that the conflict would be resolved. It is possible that these young people are just more naïve and less experienced than other family members. It is also possible that they are basing their judgments on their experience of conflict in the family, and that it is easier for them as 'outsiders' not actually involved in the conflict to see the possibility of resolution.

Emotional reactions

Mutual tapes induced the most positive emotion, and coercion induced the least. Interestingly, adolescents reported lower levels of positive emotion for mutual child-related tapes than parents, whereas

there were no differences between reporters for the non child-related conflicts. This finding suggests that child-related conflicts may be particularly unpleasant for adolescents (Figure 1).

As would be expected, the mutual style induced less negative emotion than other styles, although fathers reported more negative emotion in response to mutual conflicts than other family members. Means were 9.28, 9.57 and 10.87 respectively for adolescents, mothers and fathers for child-related conflicts, and 7.66, 8.34 and 9.70 respectively for adolescents, mothers and fathers for non child-related conflicts. This finding again fits with Gottman and Levenson's (1988) claim that men have more negative reactions to conflict than women.

become emotional and withdraw. Also included in the table are definitions for the kinds of behaviours that were included in a particular category, along with examples of the actual statements made by the adolescents as to what they would do.

As can be seen from Table 4, there were a large variety of responses, which ranged from being quite aggressive ('Tell them to shut up and calm down'; 'Yell and swear'; 'Tell them it's my room and I'll keep it how I like'), to being quite constructive ('Tidy the room'; 'Clean the house'; 'Call a family conference'), and even quite creative ('Distract with a joke'; 'Lure one away for something', 'Tell them Daniel's in the bath and it's overflowing'). Some of the responses in the 'Become emotional' and 'Withdraw' categories



Marital conflict can be quite stressful for adolescents, and may lead to them feeling quite negative, not only about their parents, but about themselves.

Coercive tapes induced more negative emotion than the other negative styles, suggesting that having both members of the couple engaging in verbal attack is more stressful for family members than having one member attacking and the other withdrawing. It is important to note that there were no differences in negative emotion contingent on whether the conflict was child-related or not, and no interaction, as for positive emotion, between reporter and type of conflict.

Correlations with Conflict Resolution Style Questionnaire

Correlations between the typicality ratings of the audiotapes, and scores on the Conflict Resolution Style Questionnaire provided further evidence for the validity of the tapes. Adolescents' ratings of the typicality of the coercive child-related tapes were negatively related to reports of mutuality in interactions with mum and positively related to reports of fighting with mum. Adolescents' ratings of the typicality of mum demands were positively related to their reports of dad's avoidance, and fighting with both mum and dad. In addition, adolescents' ratings of mum demands as typical were negatively related to their reports of mutuality with mum and dad.

Behavioural reactions

Both the adolescents and the parents were asked what the child would be likely to do if the conflict between the parents occurred in their own home. In general, only about half the participants responded, with the other half, mostly fathers, giving no response. Presumably, those who didn't respond thought that the adolescent would do nothing, or were uncertain about what he or she might do.

We created a coding scheme to enable us to categorise the responses. Table 4 presents the seven codes we devised: diversion, positive involvement, negative involvement, soothing, problem-solving,

suggested that marital conflict can be quite stressful for adolescents, and may lead to them feeling quite negative, not only about their parents, but about themselves.

Mutual arguments were more likely than the more negative styles to elicit no response, suggesting that the young people are not as distressed by these conflicts and are able to let them pass without experiencing a need to get involved, or even to withdraw. The most common response for child-related issues was to create a diversion by the means shown in the examples in the table.

Problem-solving was more likely for child-related issues than for non-child-related issues. Because it was the tidiness of their room that was the main focus for these arguments, adolescents said that they would solve the problem by cleaning the room – that is, removing the source of the conflict – in the hope that the parents would then stop arguing. When issues were not child-related, adolescents, especially girls, said that they would be more likely to withdraw or keep away.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations for ratings of the likelihood of resolution, by type of conflict, reporter and conflict style

Type of conflict	Child-related			Non child-related		
	Adolescent	Mother	Father	Adolescent	Mother	Father
Coercion	5.24 (2.46)	3.61 (2.02)	4.31 (2.24)	5.06 (2.32)	3.18 (1.65)	4.08 (2.51)
Dad demands	5.31 (2.35)	4.00 (2.43)	4.55 (2.60)	5.04 (2.38)	3.69 (1.82)	4.20 (1.92)
Mum demands	5.16 (2.43)	4.24 (2.21)	4.73 (2.32)	5.75 (2.70)	3.69 (1.82)	4.20 (1.92)
Mutual	10.14 (2.02)	9.75 (2.12)	9.47 (2.02)	10.31 (2.19)	10.20 (1.93)	9.71 (2.25)

Note: These scores are summed from two 6-point scales "How likely is the conflict to be resolved?" and "How likely is the conflict to get worse?" Thus, ratings are on a 12-point scale. *Source:* Marital Conflict and Adolescents Analogue Study, University of Queensland, 2000.

Sex differences in adolescents' responses

There were several responses that were more likely to be reported for girls than for boys. Girls tended to report more use of diversion, especially with child-related issues. They were also more likely to soothe than were boys, and more likely to withdraw, particularly when the issue was not child-related. Girls were more likely than boys to get involved in the conflict, and although they generally tried to solve the problem, they were also more likely to get involved negatively by openly criticising the parents or demanding that they stop arguing at once.

Differences between parents' and children's responses

There were also a number of differences between parents and children in terms of their ideas about how the adolescents would respond to the marital conflicts. Parents tended to think that the adolescents would get more emotional over child-related issues than the adolescents reported. In addition, the mothers thought that the adolescents would withdraw more than they indicated, and also that they would divert and soothe more than they

reported. On the other hand, the adolescents reported that they would engage in more problem-solving than the parents expected.

Discussion

Findings from the Marital Conflict and Adolescents Analogue Study support the validity of the analogue method for studying adolescents' responses to marital conflict. There were strong style effects, mainly for differences between the mutual and more negative styles, with the mutual style seen as more likely to be resolved, and as inducing more positive and less negative emotion. The coercive style, on the other hand, was seen as more stressful to listen to and as inducing more negative emotion than all the other styles.

It was also interesting to see that the ratings of typicality of the conflict style by family members were correlated with adolescents' reports of how conflicts between parents and children were dealt with. For example, ratings of typicality correlated negatively with reports of mutual conflict interactions with mum, and positively with fighting with mum, in line with what would be expected.

Ratings of typicality showed that the mutual style was seen as the most typical across the families, suggesting that these families were not particularly dysfunctional. It is also interesting to note, however, that the adolescents regarded the mutual constructive conflict resolution as less typical than did their parents. As noted, earlier, this finding fits with previous work on differences between parents and adolescents in their views of family processes. It is possible that the adolescents use a different standard in evaluating these processes, but it is also possible that parents overestimate their use of mutual strategies, as would be suggested by the self-serving bias.

Fathers found listening to the conflict tapes more stressful overall, in line with evidence that men generally find conflict in family relationships more stressful than do other family members. Gottman and Levenson (1988) argue that men have stronger physiological reactions to stress and conflict, and that this is why they often avoid conflict or try to withdraw from it.

Although adolescents did not report finding the tapes more stressful, they did report lower levels of positive emotion in response to the mutual tapes than did their parents, particularly for the child-related conflicts. There were no differences between family members for the conflicts that were not child-related, with reports of positive emotion being moderate to high. These findings suggest that observing child-related marital conflict is, at least in some ways, more difficult for the adolescents than for their parents. The findings for negative emotion need to be taken into account in trying to understand this finding, however, given that ratings for negative emotion were unaffected by whether the issue was child-related or not, which family member was reporting, or the type of conflict. Perhaps being the source of the conflict reduces positive emotion of adolescents because they experience feelings of guilt and insecurity. This finding is

Table 4. Categories for coding family members' responses to questions about what the adolescent would do if the conflict occurred in their own home

Code	Definition	Examples
Diversion	Use humour Change the subject Create a diversion Interrupt	Distract with a joke Ask when food will be ready Lure one away for something Cut into conversation Eg "Daniel's in the bath and it's over flowing"
Positive involvement	Take an active part in the argument	Give my opinion Enter into discussion
Negative involvement	Openly criticise parents for fighting Order parents to stop Act aggressively Defending (justify own behaviour, or move focus to someone else's behaviour)	Tell them it sounds shameful Tell them to shut up and calm down Slam bedroom door Yell and swear Tell them to look at my sister's room Give them an excuse Tell them "It's my room and I'll keep it how I like"
Soothing	Try to calm the situation without getting involved in the argument or trying to solve it	Try to tone it down Tell them both to calm down Try to get dad to settle down
Problem-solving	Remove source Engaging in or offering to engage in constructive behaviour relevant to the conflict Family problem-solving, eg try to get parents to discuss it constructively	Clean the house Vacuum the carpet Tidy the room Get them to talk about it like adults Tell my grandparents Call a family conference Discuss sharing jobs
Become emotional	General reference to becoming emotional or specific references to fear, anxiety or upset Feel guilty or responsible	Tears; cry; worry Get emotional Be very upset by threat of violence Show I'm afraid Take the blame Feel guilty about causing problems
Withdraw	Exit or leave	Duck for cover Retreat from hostility Get out of the way Keep away

Source: Marital Conflict and Adolescents Analogue Study, University of Queensland, 2000.

supported by the adolescents' reports that, in this situation, they would do something, such as get in and clean up their rooms, to remove the source of the conflict.

The qualitative reports of what the adolescents would do if these conflict interactions occurred in their homes provide some interesting information about adolescents' responses to marital conflict. The adolescents reported that they would be more likely to be involved in arguments that were about them, and less likely to get involved in arguments that were not child related. In that situation, in fact, they reported that they would be most likely to withdraw and leave the parents to sort it out. Their most common responses for the child-related issues were to try to divert their parents' attention in some way, or to do something to solve the problem. Girls tended to be more active than boys in terms of getting involved in the arguments. Perhaps, even at this age, females are already more comfortable confronting conflict than are males.

The limitations of the study include the relatively small sample, although studies where each family is seen separately tend to involve smaller samples. Another possible problem is that the reports of typicality are likely to be affected by social desirability bias, or, as we have already suggested, by self-serving bias. These biases are ubiquitous in self-report studies, and may even reflect the actual perceptions of family members. It is important, however, not to lose sight of the fact that self-report can also provide valuable information. In addition, it is clear that the participants in this study responded differently to the different conflict styles, and were able to distinguish between them.

It is also possible that the conflicts presented on the audiotapes were not as salient for family members as conflicts actually occurring in their own homes. The ratings of stressfulness tend to be low but with a reasonable range, and negative emotional reactions are fairly high, with quite a large range. For example, mean ratings of the coercive interaction range from 15.06 out of 30 to 21.40 out of 30, depending on whether the issue was child-related or not, and who was doing the rating. Standard deviations range from 5.89 to 7.11. These ratings suggest that some family members responded very negatively to at least some of the tapes. In addition, the intensity of some of the behaviours adolescents reported they would do, if the conflict occurred in their own homes, suggest that they find marital conflict difficult to deal with, especially if that conflict involves their own negative behaviour.

Conclusion

This study has shown the usefulness of an analogue methodology for exploring adolescents' reactions to marital conflict. We have another study using a similar methodology where the tapes were constructed similarly, but involved conflicts between parents and adolescents. In this case, there were separate sets of tapes for male and female adolescents, and four of the tapes in each set involved conflicts with mothers and the other four involved conflicts with fathers. It will be interesting to see whether family

members are able to discriminate between the different types of conflict in this very different context.

It seems clear from the findings of the Marital Conflict and Adolescents Analogue Study that adolescents are able to distinguish between constructive and destructive marital conflict in terms of its typicality, stressfulness and likelihood of resolution. They also reacted differently both emotionally and behaviourally, depending on the style of the conflict and whether it was child-related or not.

Thus marital conflict is likely to affect adolescents differently depending on how constructive versus destructive the conflicts between their parents are, and whether the arguments involved the children or not. It would seem that teaching parents more constructive ways of dealing with conflicts should have positive repercussions for the whole family.

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