

PARENTAL CONFLICT AND INTIMACY: DO OUR PERCEPTIONS INFLUENCE THE FORMATION OF PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS?

Emily Michael and Abby Spiegel

Abstract

This study examined the possible relationship between perceptions of parental conflict and intimacy in same-sex friendships within a sample of college students ($n = 85$) at a small liberal arts college. The role of parental marital status in affecting intimacy was also investigated with the prediction that this variable would not have a significant influence upon intimacy. The potential effects of gender and presence of siblings were explored as well. In accordance with our predictions, the results of this study revealed a significant negative correlation between perceived parental conflict and intimacy. However, no significant difference was found for intimacy based upon parental marital status. Additionally, significant effects of gender and presence of siblings upon intimate ability were demonstrated. Implications of these findings for future research as well as possible mechanisms for intervention are discussed.

Introduction

Every year one million children experience divorce (US Bureau of the Census 1989; as cited in Amato & Keith, 1991). The breakdown of significant relational bonds in divorce may influence the ability of children of divorce to form future relationships (Jennings, Salts, & Smith, 1992). Children from divorced families exhibit lower overall intimacy than children from intact families (Hertz-Lazarowitz, Rosenberg, & Guttman, 1989; as cited in Sharabany, 1994). Children from divorced families may therefore have difficulty establishing and maintaining close, intimate relationships. This paper examines how divorce and other variables that influence a child's intimate ability (such as gender, presence of siblings, and perceptions of parental conflict) affect later young-adult relationships.

Examining the effects of family structure (i.e. divorced, married) upon children brings forth the question of whether it is overall structure, or a more specific variable that has the greatest influence on children. Specifically, is it the experience of divorce or rather the experience of a high level of parental conflict that has the most negative consequences upon the child's future adjustment? The necessity of studying family processes and not just family structure has been argued in light of the possibility that

children from either intact homes with high conflict or children from divorced homes may exhibit similar responses to conflict (Emery, 1982; as cited in Jennings et al., 1992). It has additionally been suggested that past research has been overly concerned with examining family structure, while family processes may be just as influential to the overall wellbeing of the child (Levitin, 1979).

Role of Parental Conflict

The quality of the relationship that exists between parents plays a large role in the later adjustment of the child (Morris & West, 2001). This finding supports the notion that although a child may come from an intact home, the negative effect of a poor parental relationship upon the child could surpass the negative effect of parental divorce upon the child. Are all children affected similarly by relational conflict? Cummings, Vogel, Cummings, and El-Sheikh (1989) found that angry interactions, including non-verbal anger, were perceived as negative events and elicited negative emotions in children. Moreover, children of all ages discriminated between angry and friendly conditions. These findings present the potential issue of the negative effects of parental conflict as relevant to all children, regardless of overall family structure (Cummings et al., 1989).

When children become aware of conflict, they begin to make evaluations regarding that conflict and its significance (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). Therefore, it is the child's perceptions of parental conflict rather than the conflict itself that is most critical to an understanding of the impact of that conflict upon the child (Grych et al., 1992). Specifically, the variables of perceived threat, coping efficacy, causal attributions, and ascription of blame are suggested by Grych et al. (1992) to shape the child's perception of parental conflict.

Further examination of the effects of conflict upon children reveals significant gender differences in response to parental dysfunction; such differences have been found in favorableness of attitudes towards marriage as a function of parental marital status and/or conflict (Wallin, 1954; as cited in Jennings et al., 1992). Additionally, Hetherington (1989) showed that boys have more problems than girls when adjusting to divorce and remarriage. In accordance with this finding, boys have reported more angry feelings than girls in response to marital discord (Cummings et al., 1989). Therefore, it is evident that research must take gender into account when examining the effects of perceived parental conflict upon children.

Role of Siblings

Other findings have shown a relationship between the presence of siblings and the quality of both peer and parental relationships in the child's life. Sibling relationships can be used to explain significant variance in the well-being of individuals, as influenced through parent and peer relationships (Field, Diego, & Sanders, 2002). Hetherington (1989) points out that little research has been conducted which examines the possible protective role of siblings in high stress situations. She suggests two possible outcomes, which may occur as a product of the sibling relationship. One, that siblings may become increasingly hostile as they compete for scarce resources. Two, that siblings may turn to each other for support in times of need, thus serving as a protective buffer for one another (Hetherington, 1989).

Gender differences have been found in the significant role played by siblings in the lives of male and female children, respectively (Blyth & Foster-Clark, 1987). Girls rate sibling relationships as more intimate than boys, thus exemplifying the differential

role that these relationships play in female lives. Blyth and Foster-Clark (1987) suggest that this difference is the result of socialization processes, through which it is expected that girls engage in nurturing behavior with their siblings. For boys, on the other hand, an intimate sibling relationship may be accepted, but it may not be encouraged in the way that it is for their female counterparts.

Role of Intimacy

Much research has focused upon the role that intimate relationships play in the overall wellbeing of individuals. Satisfying intimate relationships provide a source of delight and purpose in life, and are additionally vital to mental health, psychosocial adjustment and basic human needs (Freedman, 1978; as cited in Thelen, Vander Wal, Thomas, and Harmon, 2000). In a study examining the effect of adolescents' parent and peer relationships upon adjustment, Field et al. (2002) found that individuals with high parent and peer relationship scores had more friends, greater family togetherness, lower levels of depression and drug use, as well as a higher academic GPA than those with low relationship scores. Additionally, adolescents with more intimate relationships exhibited more positive adjustment characteristics than those with less intimate relationships (Field, Lang, Yando, & Bendell, 1995; as cited in Field et al., 2002). It has further been suggested that the inability to be intimate and form intimate relationships may result in the development of neurotic disorders (Wilhelm & Parker, 1988).

A closer look at the role of intimacy in forming successful relationships confirms the importance of intimacy in one's life. For example, couples with high levels of intimacy are likely to have enduring relationships, while couples with low levels of intimacy are likely to have brief relationships (Berg and McQuinn, 1986). Furthermore, frequent exposure to maternal anger in childhood has been linked with nonempathic responding to the distress of others (Crockenberg, 1985). Given that empathy is important in establishing and sustaining an intimate relationship, the need to intervene in such situations of exposure to negative environmental stressors is quite apparent.

Although the significant role that intimate relationships play in an individual's life has been made evident, it is important to acknowledge that certain gender differences do exist. Thelen et al. (2002) have shown that males have higher fear of intimacy than females. This difference has been proposed to be a result of socialization practices, specifically that interpersonal relationships are of central importance in women's lives and as a result, females tend to maintain more intimate relationships with friends than males (Josselson, 1992; as cited in Eshel, Sharabany, & Friedman, 1998). Additionally, female friendships are centered upon intimacy and mutual support, while male friendships are centered upon shared activities and instrumental report (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982). While girls have been noted to describe higher levels of intimacy than boys with a same-sex friend in some studies (Blyth & Foster-Clark, 1987), other studies have not revealed such gender differences in intimacy (Reis et al., 1985; as cited in Blyth & Foster-Clark, 1987). Thus, it is important to include gender as a variable when examining intimacy.

Risk Factors

Understanding that intimacy is critical to the formation of relationships, which in turn are vital to the foundation of a healthy and happy life, it is therefore necessary to examine possible risk factors that may inhibit intimate ability. Field et al. (2002) suggest that peer attachment is more influential on adolescent adjustment than parent attachment.

If peer relationships are affected by an inability to be intimate, which is in turn a result of perceptions of parental conflict, then intervention is necessary to promote the success of peer relationships in the face of this conflict. Through this success, the individual wellbeing of the child will thus be fostered.

Considering the critical nature of this topic, we believe that it is necessary to further examine the role of perceived parental conflict upon the ability to establish and express intimate relationships with same-sex peers. Therefore, we have designed a study which looks at variables that we believe to affect intimacy. In our study, we predict that participants who perceive higher levels of parental conflict will reveal lower intimacy for same-sex friendships. Conversely, participants who perceive lower levels of parental conflict will reveal higher levels of intimacy for same-sex friendships. Additionally, we predict that the marital status of the participants' parents will not be as influential upon intimacy scores as the level of perceived conflict between the participants' parents. Thus, we propose that our results will reveal that coming from a home with high parental conflict is more detrimental to one's ability to form intimate friendships than coming from a divorced home. As a result of the aforementioned research, we also predict that male intimacy scores will be lower than female intimacy scores overall, regardless of conflict scores. Finally, we predict that the presence of siblings in the participants' home environment will serve as a psychosocial buffer against the negative effects of parental conflict, and therefore will make the intimacy scores of those participants higher than that of participants without siblings.

Method

Participants

Eighty-six students from a small liberal arts college in central New York were asked to participate in our study. Out of these participants, 60 were female and 26 were male. One female subject was removed from the study due to incomplete data ($n = 85$). Students ranged in age from 18-21, with a mean age of 19.5 years. Students were recruited through involvement in various campus groups as well as through participation in the introductory psychology course at the university.

Materials

A demographic questionnaire asking questions about the participant's home environment (i.e. parent's marital status and presence of siblings in the home), participant's age, and sex was administered to all participants. To measure intimacy, the Intimate Friendship Scale (Sharabany, 1994) was given to each participant; two versions were used depending upon the sex of the participant. Specifically, participants were asked to answer the questions based upon their relationship with a same-sex friend. Depending upon the sex of the participant, the sex of the friend described in the scale was appropriately matched. This scale used a six-point rating system from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), which required the participant to rate statements based upon the degree to which the participant believed them to be true.

To measure perceptions of parental conflict, the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992) was also included in our study. This scale also used a six-point rating system from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), which required the participant to rate statements based upon the degree

to which the participant believed them to be true. Eleven items from this scale were reversed scored. This scale, which was originally designed for use with school-aged children (ages 9-12) was found to be both reliable and valid for use with young adults by Bickham and Fiese (1997), thus justifying its use in our study.

Procedure

The study was conducted within the particular meeting place of the campus group in which the recruited participants were involved. The leaders of these groups were contacted individually, at which time the participation of their group in the study was requested. Approximately 20-40 participants were given the study at each testing session. A consent form was administered to each participant before they were able to begin the study. Participants were then given the demographic as well as the two other questionnaires, which were counterbalanced in order to prevent confounded data. The questionnaires were coded with a number in order to protect the identity of the participants. Upon completion of the questionnaire packet, each participant was given a debriefing statement that gave an overview of the purpose of the study. Participants were also given the name of a campus resource, which could provide additional assistance for any participants who felt that the study brought up any feelings that they needed to resolve.

Results

For all a priori statistical tests, an alpha level of .05 was used. When post hoc tests were conducted, a more stringent alpha level of .01 was used. Our results revealed a negative correlation between perceptions of parental conflict and intimacy with a same-sex friend. Parental marital status (i.e. divorced, married, other) was not found to influence participant intimacy. A relationship was also found between the participant's gender and overall intimacy. Finally, the presence of siblings was also related to intimacy.

To test for a relationship between perceived parental conflict and intimacy, a one-tailed bivariate correlational analysis was conducted. This test revealed a negative correlation between these two variables, indicating that the higher the perceived parental conflict, the lower the intimacy with a same-sex friend, and vice-versa. This correlation was statistically significant, $r_{(83)} = .21, p = .029$.

For marital status and participant intimacy, a one-way ANOVA was performed. No significant difference was demonstrated in overall intimacy scores as a result of parental marital status, $F_{(2,82)} = 0.45, p = .638$. To test the specific prediction that participant intimacy would not be affected by either married or divorced parental backgrounds, an independent samples t-test was additionally run. No significant difference was revealed through the test, $t_{(83)} = 0.88, p = .384$.

To examine the prediction that females would exhibit higher intimacy levels than males, an independent samples t-test was conducted. This test confirmed a significant difference in overall intimacy as a function of gender, $t_{(83)} = 5.16, p < .001$. Therefore, female participants were found to have significantly higher intimacy than male participants. To look for a difference in perception of parental conflict as a function of

gender, a post-hoc test was completed. This independent samples t-test found no significant difference, $t_{(83)} = 0.47, p = .643$.

In order to test our prediction that the presence of siblings would promote intimacy, an independent samples t-test was performed. This test revealed a significant relationship between these two variables, $t_{(83)} = 2.25, p = .014$. This finding indicates that the presence of siblings affects intimate ability in that when a participant reported having one or more siblings, his or her intimacy score was higher than a participant who did not have any siblings. For perception of parental conflict and presence of siblings, an independent samples t-test was performed. No significant relationship was found, $t_{(83)} = 0.001, p = .999$. These results illustrate that the presence of siblings does not affect perceptions of parental conflict. To test for a possible influence of the number of siblings upon participant intimacy, a post-hoc bivariate correlational analysis was performed that found no significant effect, $r_{(83)} = .074, p = .50$. Therefore, the number of siblings that a participant reported him or herself to have was irrelevant to that participant's intimacy level.

Discussion

The results of our study largely support our hypotheses and therefore have important implications for an understanding of the development of intimacy. This relationship between perceptions of parental conflict and intimacy provides a strong foundation upon which to examine the multiple ways that characteristics of both the individual as well as the individual's home environment influence future wellbeing. A strong association between marital conflict and children's overall wellbeing has been established through a multitude of studies (Jenkins & Smith, 1991). Therefore, our research aimed to further explore this association and highlight specific variables that promote intimate ability in the face of adverse conditions.

Our research reflects an interesting interpretation of divorce and its consequences for children. The finding that intimacy is not affected by marital status while it is affected by perceived parental conflict reveals that conflict between married parents is potentially more detrimental to the future wellbeing of the child than is the practice of divorce. Therefore, we believe that divorce should be viewed as a solution to marital disharmony, which promotes the best interests of the child, over an "intact" home environment that is filled with conflict and negative influences.

Looking specifically at the role of gender in expressing intimacy, our results indicate the presence of gender differences. This effect between gender and intimacy is further understood through post-hoc analysis that revealed no effect between gender and perceived parental conflict. These findings together, suggest that both males and females are able to process parental conflict in an equivalent manner; the discrepancy therefore lies in the ability of both genders to be intimate with a same-sex friend in the face of this conflict.

The aforementioned results reflect the different ways in which males and females are socialized within our society. The female gender role is one that has been proposed to encourage the formation of close relationships and intimacy, while males are encouraged to separate and maintain their individuality. As a result of the connection between intimacy and psychological adjustment, these differing socialization processes may prove

to be detrimental to males, especially in the presence of parental conflict. Therefore, it is important that the negative effects of parental conflict are specifically recognized for males, with society as a whole taking responsibility through early intervention. Such intervention may be possible within the school systems, and specifically through the development and training of teachers in the restructuring of pre-existing gender norms.

As a result of our findings, we believe that it is important to discuss the role of siblings in affecting intimacy. While post-hoc tests found the number of siblings to have no effect upon intimacy, the presence of siblings was found to be significant. This effect is important in that the presence of siblings may serve as a psychosocial buffer against the negative effects of parental conflict within the home, regardless of the number of siblings present within the household. The power of the sibling relationship should therefore not be overlooked. We suggest that future studies further investigate the intricacies of the sibling bond, in terms of its influence not only upon intimacy but also upon other aspects of identity development. The responsibility of parents to promote the sibling relationship among their children is supported through this research, especially when marital conflict exists. These results also have significant implications for the negative repercussions of parental conflict upon only children. It therefore may be more important for only children to have a strong support system outside the home (be it through peers or extended family members) when they are in the midst of a disharmonious home environment.

While our results were statistically significant and in the specific directions that we predicted them to be, there are a few methodological restrictions that may have affected our data. One possible confound may have been that the participant pool from which we drew our sample was small as well as rather homogenous (mostly white, middle to upper class college students). You and Malley-Morrison (2000) found a discrepancy in the intimacy levels of Korean and American students. This difference suggests that culture may play a role in the expression of intimacy, and therefore we believe that this variable should be further examined in the future.

As a result of the small participant pool and of the similar socioeconomic backgrounds of our participants, certain variables may not have been accurately represented in our sample. More specifically, the amount of participants without siblings ($n = 4$) as well as the amount of participants who come from a divorced home ($n = 9$) may have influenced our results. Because of these potential confounds, we suggest that future research attempt to examine a larger and more diverse sample of participants, with a more balanced representation of participants from divorced homes, and of participants who do not have any siblings.

Future research in this area may help to better understand the effect of perceived parental conflict upon intimacy. Although our study explored the effects of perceived parental conflict upon intimacy with a same-sex friend, we believe that this effect may be revealed in a more significant way when perceptions of parental conflict are examined in terms of intimacy in romantic relationships. Morris and West (2001) reported a predictive relationship between parental conflict and a young adult's perceived risk in intimate relationships. Therefore, this is an area of research that ought to be explored in more detail, especially in light of the evidence that connects intimate relationships to psychological functioning (Morris & West, 2001).

As previously mentioned, we believe that our results have important implications that ought to be considered by society as a whole in terms of the ways in which divorce is regarded. While we do not encourage divorce, we do believe as a result of our findings that the effects of parental conflict in an intact marriage are more detrimental to the future wellbeing of the child than is the experience of a parent's divorce. We believe that parents are responsible to take an active role in considering the needs of their children. It is incredibly important for parents to additionally recognize the fact that their children are acutely aware of any conflict that exists within their marriage and that this awareness has the potential to negatively affect them. We hope that our research may help to enlighten society regarding this issue as well as to the negative consequences of parental conflict.

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