Family Triads in Conflict: The Case for Symmetry of Communication Styles

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This study examined family members' reported use of conflict styles within intact family triads (mothers, fathers, and their young adult children) in the launching stage of the family life cycle. Members of 72 family units (N=216) completed a questionnaire which asked how frequently they employed passive-indirect, distributive, and integrative styles when managing conflict in their families. Reported use of conflict style was compared across family members to assess the existence of symmetrical or asymmetrical family conflict styles, satisfaction with conflict, and reported openness of communication. Results indicated that most families reported use of symmetrically integrative conflict styles, and that symmetry existed only when integrative styles were reported by all family members. Further, members who report use of distributive or passive-indirect styles also reported less openness of communication within the family unit. Overall, these findings indicate that families in the launching stage reported managing conflict constructively. Most importantly, the results suggest an interesting relationship between integrative styles and relational symmetry, a relationship worthy of investigation in future research.

Introduction

In an explanation of family triads and coalitions, Caplow (1968) stated, "The overwhelming majority of the human race, past and present, have awakened to consciousness in the presence of a pair of adults whom they called mother and father, by whom they were at first completely dominated, and from whom later, by slow degrees, they were emancipated" (p. 62). The "emancipation" from parental control is an interesting process, particularly for communication theorists. As children develop, so do their parents and other family members (Duck, 1986), and communication patterns correspondingly shift with this development. Topics of communication, interpersonal relational patterns, and methods for managing family conflict are but a few areas that change as families

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move through the family life cycle (Cobb, 1992; Gayle, 1992; Olson, 1988; Pearson, 1993; Vangelisti, 1992; Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

Conflict management in the family context is an especially important research area, for as Stagner (1967) argued, analysis of the most basic principles of social conflict should begin with the family. Knowledge of conflict principles is rooted in the study of familial tension, and exploring how family members communicate when problems arise informs a general understanding of social conflict in groups, organizations, and even national/political disputes. After all, people experience their first conflicts within the framework of family life, and the styles of resolution developed in those early years are affected by the family and will "probably persist throughout life" (Stagner, 1967, p. 27). The nature of those styles of conflict resolution and the dynamic conflict exchanges between the primary family triad (the child, mother and father) is the focus of this study. Specifically, conflict styles in intact family triads in the launching stage of the family life cycle are examined, and power-dependency theory is employed as an explanatory framework.

Caplow (1968), who popularized the notion of a primary triad, developed the concept from a conflict theory perspective. He argues that triads are perpetually in conflict, frequently because coalitions emerge in them. For example, mothers and fathers may form an alliance and exert great power over their children, or mothers and daughters may ally against fathers, and so on. One key element in the triad is the distribution of power. The child's power gradually increases over time, until it approximates or perhaps even exceeds parental power. This shift in power may result in instability within the family system (Caplow, 1968, p. 63).

Perhaps at no other time is the power shift more apparent than when a child prepares to leave the family nest. Young adults, formerly quite dependent upon their parents, move toward autonomy and accumulate more power; this shift can create misunderstandings and conflict may emerge (Pearson, 1993). However, when familial tensions arise, young adults have more resources with which to manage conflict(s) than in the past. Parents find it difficult to resolve disputes by "grounding" young adults or by ordering them to "go to their rooms." As families grow older, methods for managing conflicts change, primarily because children attain more power and parent-child separation continues to occur (Galvin & Brommel, 1982).

Power Dependency Theory

The dynamics of family power can be understood from a social exchange perspective, since power can be interpreted as a product of an imbalance in resources. Social exchange pervades our lives on both micro and macro levels and is based upon choice-making behaviors. According to exchange theorists, all

human relationships can be explained by the premise that humans avoid costs and seek rewards, and people are continually seeking to maximize profits (see Blau, 1964; Homans, 1959; Levi-Straus,1969; Nye, 1979; Sahlins, 1965; Thibaut & Kelley, 1967).

McCall and Simmons (1966) assert that the power is held by those who have the greatest capacity to provide relational rewards. Therefore, family members who are in a position to provide rewards and costs to other members have the most power. Obviously, parents initially have greater power, although children (even infants) are capable of controlling rewards and costs to a degree (Turk & Bell, 1972). Fitzpatrick and Badzinski (1994) noted that "the behavior of even the youngest child can stimulate, elicit, motivate, and reward the actions of parents" (p. 749). Children are powerful because their behavior can affect parents (Bell, 1971).

Power dependency theory, a derivative of the social exchange approach, provides a framework for examining familial conflicts and interpreting conflict styles in the primary triad. Power dependency studies have established that an imbalance in power produces asymmetrical exchange, and that as the imbalance increases, the relational asymmetry increases (Burgess & Nielsen, 1974; Cook, Gillmore, & Yamagishi, 1983; Michaels & Wiggins, 1976; Molm, 1981a, 1981b, 1985). In other words, if two people are equally dependent upon one another, their relationship is balanced and symmetrical; neither has a power advantage over the other. However, if one person is more dependent than the other, the relationship is imbalanced or asymmetric. The greater the disparity between dependencies, the greater the power imbalance (Molm, 1987).

Pearson (1993) argues that the dependency of one individual upon another creates the potential for conflict in families, and Galvin and Brommel (1982) state that any relationship in a family provides the opportunity for power struggles to arise. A family may engage in symmetric struggles when members are similar in resources and perceive their situation as such; asymmetic struggles emerge when members are unequally dependent upon one another (Smetana, 1995; Sprey, 1979). The authority structure of families virtually ensures that conflict is inevitable and stems from power imbalance. Likewise, the natural move toward autonomy by children as they mature ensures that methods for managing struggles will undergo transformation throughout the family life cycle.

Given the potential importance of the family in developing conflict strategies, relatively little is known about the nature of conflict in the latter stages of the family life cycle; indeed, few studies have focused upon late adolescence and its implications for family dynamics. One stage of the family life cycle, the launching stage, serves as a transitional period which moves older adolescents into young adulthood. Family transitions between stages are periods of instability and are often marked by conflict within the family system. Unfortunately, studies

which have examined conflict between adolescents and their parents tend to assume conflict is unidimensional. That is, the presence of conflict is assumed to be a stressor, yet researchers have investigated neither the types of conflict which may be present nor the particular communication patterns family members may adopt during conflict episodes (e.g. Montemayor, 1983; Steinberg, 1987; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Further, many studies of families have focused not upon the family itself, but rather upon *individuals* within families or particular familial pairs, such as the marital dyad or the mother-infant relationship (Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1994). The purpose of this study is to examine reported use of conflict styles within primary family triads (mother, father, and child) during a major transition in family life: the launching stage.

Family Life Cycles: The Launching Stage

The launching stage has been identified as problematic and potentially the longest stage of the family life cycle (Galvin & Brommel, 1982; Mattesich & Hill, 1987; McGoldrick & Carter, 1982). The launching stage begins when the first child leaves the home for permanent employment, military service, marriage or college and extends until the last child has left the home (Duvall, 1977). Thus, it spans decades for some families and only months for others. The nuclear family shrinks during this time until what is left at home in the next stage, the empty nest stage, is the original marital dyad.

Of particular interest during the launching stage is the manner in which families manage conflict as children leave home. Most of the literature concerning the launching stage depicts it as tumultuous and quite stressful (Anderson, 1988; Finkel & Hansen, 1992; Klimek & Anderson, 1988; Lopez, Campbell & Watkins, 1989).The developmental needs of the young adult during this time can be in conflict with the needs of the family, especially when a young adult expresses needs for individuation and separation (Finkel & Hansen, 1992; Hoffman & Weiss, 1987; Klimek & Anderson, 1988; Lopez et al., 1989; Smith, 1988). Olson (1988) reported that family cohesion drops to its lowest level during the launching stage, and families also report a marked decrease in adaptive ability. Notably, "transition" is listed as a key stressor during this period, and it is not reported as a source of strain by families at any other phase of the life cycle (Olson, 1988).

Parent-Adolescent Conflict

When describing conflict, many communication researchers draw upon the now familiar definition proposed by Hocker and Wilmont (1985): "Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive

incompatible goals, scarce rewards, and interference from the other parties in achieving their goals" (p. 9). Goals within the family context may be quite heterogeneous; the adolescent's goals may differ dramatically from parental goals. What is known about conflict between parents and their adolescent children is that conflict occurs frequently in these relationships and covers a range of issues, such as family household chores and performance in school (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Generally, parent-adolescent conflict is viewed as functional and maybe even inevitable, given the changes in parent-adolescent relationships as a consequence of puberty (Montemayor, 1983; Steinberg, 1987). The move from childhood to adolescence (and ultimately to adulthood) is a major transition which is characteristically stressful because adolescents often lack sufficient coping mechanisms to guide them through such transitions. Although stressful, family conflict may serve important purposes, such as the facilitation of developmental growth in the adolescent (Erikson, 1968; Kohlberg, 1969) and identity exploration (Cooper, Grotevant, Moore, & Condon, 1982). Traditionally, researchers have focused only upon the presence or absence of conflict in parent-adolescent relationships and not upon the communication patterns that may be present. Whether conflict somehow changes and becomes more destructive in the launching stage, due perhaps to increased stress brought on by this major transition, is not clear. In fact, the opposite may be true; as adolescents move toward adulthood, they may develop an enhanced capacity for engaging in productive conflict management.

Clearly, the transitional launching period is a critical one, and investigation of how parents and young adults perceive and manage conflict is important. It may be that the styles used to resolve conflicts at this stage have a lasting impact upon the family system and subsequent communication patterns.

Conflict Styles

The productive/destructive element of conflict has long been recognized as central for the maintenance and morphogenesis of relational systems (Braiker & Kelley, 1979; Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1973). Destructive conflict is characterized by a win-lose orientation with a focus upon manipulation and coercion (Deutsch, 1973), while productive conflict is win-win oriented and results in maximization of goals for the involved parties. This win-win versus win-loss orientation can also be understood as maximizing one's rewards for self versus other.

Researchers have identified three general conflict styles: integrative, distributive, and avoidance (see Cupach, 1982; Putnam & Wilson, 1982; Roloff, 1976). Sillars (1980), for example, has successfully used a three-dimensional model (integrative, distributive, and passive-indirect strategies) in studies of roommate conflict. For Sillars, passive-indirect would include avoidance and

accommodation (nonconfrontation) strategies, and integrative strategies represent a direct attempt to manage conflict from a win-win productive orientation. Distributive strategies are derived from a competitive, win-lose orientation and include tactics that can be described as forceful and controlling (see Sillars, Coletti, Parry, & Rogers, 1982). This triad of styles has appeared in some form in a wide range of conflict research. More specifically, family researchers have applied versions of this category system in studies of late adolescence (Comstock, 1994; Gayle, 1992).

Integrative styles have been associated with communication satisfaction (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Cupach, 1982), relational intimacy (Cupach, 1982), and satisfaction with conflict resolution (Koren, Carlton, & Shaw, 1980). Distributive styles, however, appear to negatively affect relationships in terms of communication and relational satisfaction (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Cupach, 1982; Gottman, 1979, 1982). Findings are less clear with regard to avoidance styles. Although most researchers have found that avoidance styles are negatively associated with relational and communication satisfaction (Cupach, 1982; Sillars, 1980), other researchers have found that partners who use avoidance styles report being satisfied with their relationship (Fitzpatrick & Winke, 1979).

Sillars' (1980) three-category approach has been adopted in the present study as a tool for assessing how parents and young adults perceive interactions in situations of conflict. In the launching stage, it is expected that conflict exists and will potentially be addressed by using passive-indirect, distributive, and integrative styles. Moreover, because this study investigates family triads in conflict, a key area of interest is the combination of styles that may emerge within family systems. It may be that members of a triad use the same styles, which would result in *symmetrical* conflict, or members may employ different styles, which results in *asymmetrical* conflict management. For example, if mother, father, and adolescent all report using integrative styles, their triad could be described as manifesting integrative conflict symmetry. However, if mother and father report integrative styles while the adolescent reports using distributive styles, their triad could be described as exhibiting asymmetrical patterns of conflict.

Hypotheses

Evidence suggests that although conflict between parents and adolescents occurs frequently in the launching stage, it is not necessarily destructive and may in fact be managed constructively. It is known that most families *are* able to navigate the troubled waters of this period and move into subsequent stages with feelings of increased satisfaction with familial relationships (Olson, 1988). Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Family members will report using integrative rather than passive-indirect and distributive styles during the launching stage of the family life cycle.

Also at issue here is the symmetrical nature of conflict within the triad: whether all members of a triad display the same style, or whether there is a mix of styles, which would be asymmetric. Because children can learn methods of conflict resolution from their families, it is anticipated that young adults will display conflict styles similar to those used by their parents. As Stagner (1967) noted, children are likely to adopt the management techniques they see their parents use: "one way of describing the process is to say that the child acquires images of different methods for dealing with conflict and when an appropriate situation arises, he [or she] will reinstate this image and guide his [or her] behavior accordingly" (p. 28). Though certainly not all children follow models of conflict management gleaned from their parents, children's first experiences with conflict most often occur within a family context, and behaviors are influenced by the dynamics or the interplay of management styles. According to this reasoning, conflict styles in triads should most often be symmetric--the mother, father, and young adult should all report using the same style. Thus, the following is hypothesized:

H2: Families will most frequently report managing conflict with symmetrical rather than asymmetrical conflict styles.

Symmetric integration, where all members manage conflict integratively, should be associated with high relational satisfaction, but symmetrically distributive, symmetrically passive, and asymmetric triads should display lower relational satisfaction. Asymmetry in relationships can result in negative communication patterns because power imbalances contribute to disconfirming tactics such as interruptions, topic shifts, and ignoring others (Hardesty, 1988). Logically, then, three people whose conflict styles do not match (or whose styles are matched but are win-lose or lose-lose oriented) would be less satisfied with their family conflict than those who are symmetrically integrative. Thus, the following is hypothesized:

H3: Families with symmetrically integrative conflict styles will report more satisfaction with conflict than families with asymmetrical, symmetrically distributive, or symmetrically passive-indirect conflict styles.

Also of interest in examining conflict style symmetry is the relation between the communicative openness of the family system and conflict style. Kantor and Lehr (1976) described open systems as those which actively engage in exchanges with the environment, while relatively closed systems engage in little exchange. In closed communication systems, family members may restrict their communication with each other, thus giving rise to such questions as whether or not symmetry of communication can exist in a closed system. In a closed system it is conceivable that members would report asymmetric conflict styles:

> H4:   Symmetrical families will report more open family communication than asymmetrical families.

Method

Research Participants

Participants ($\underline{N}$ = 216) for this study were college students and their parents. The families ($\underline{n}$ = 72) were recruited through students in classes at a large southeastern university. Requirements for inclusion in the study was that the target family have a child currently in college and the young adult (student), mother and father were all willing to participate. These data were collected through self-report questionnaires from members of the same family because hypotheses assessed *perceived use* of conflict strategies. The study was conducted outside of class on a voluntary basis with questionnaires filled out by participants in their homes. Each participant was given an envelope along with the questionnaire to decrease the potential for social desirability bias, and each participant placed his/her questionnaire in the envelope and sealed it upon completion. Two versions of the conflict style questionnaires were developed (parent/young adult), with wording changes to accommodate the perspective of the participant. Young adults responded to the questions in reference to their parents, and both parents responded in reference to the participating young adult.

Because data were collected as family triads, there were equal numbers of participants in the three family roles: young adults ($\underline{n}$=72), mothers ($\underline{n}$=72), and fathers ($\underline{n}$=72). The mean age for the young adults in the study was 20 ($\underline{SD}$ = 1 year), and the young adult sample was 85% female ($\underline{n}$=61) and 15% male ($\underline{n}$=11). The mean age of the fathers was 48 years ($\underline{SD}$ = 5 years) and mothers was 46 years ($\underline{SD}$ = 4 years). These families averaged 2.4 children ($\underline{SD}$ = .88), and the target young adults lived, on average, 124 miles ($\underline{SD}$ = 134 miles) from their parents.

Measurement Instruments

Conflict styles

Conflict styles were measured according to the frequency with which different conflict management strategies were used in a variety of topic areas. Items asked participants how often they used each of three strategies when they and their parents/young adult disagreed on each of fourteen topics. The conflict styles presented were distributive, integrative and passive-indirect (Sillars, 1980). Each conflict style was presented with a short description. The description for integrative conflict style stated, "Integration is a more cooperative strategy in which both parties work together to solve their problem. This approach emphasizes uncritical exploration of both sides of the issue." The description for distributive conflict style stated, "Distributive strategies are more aggressive and involve trying to win the conflict at the expense of the other party. This strategy is characterized by forceful argument." The description for passive-indirect conflict style stated, "Passive-indirect strategies involve trying to minimize the conflict by avoiding an overt discussion, ignoring or indirectly addressing it. Examples involve submissive, avoiding or indirect strategies." Responses for each topic on 5 point Likert-type scales ranged from "never used" to "always used" with an N/A option.

The following topics were presented for each of the three strategies: finances, school/education, career choice, sexual issues, independence, dating relationships, housing, religion, health issues, family problems, time spent at home, clothing, social life, and moral/value issues. For each of the three styles, the 14 items were summed and averaged to form composites, with high scores indicating more reported use of a conflict style. The reliabilities of these scales were very high ($\propto_{integrative} = .97$; $\propto_{distributive} = .97$; $\propto_{passive-indirect} = .96$).

Satisfaction with conflict

Individuals' satisfaction with conflict was measured with 14 five-point Likert-type scales. The stimulus question asked, "How satisfied are you with the way conflict is handled in your family in each of the following areas?". Responses ranged from "very satisfied" to "not at all satisfied," with a high score indicating more satisfaction with family conflict. The 14 topics/areas are the same as those listed for conflict styles. These items were summed and averaged to form a composite scale, and the reliability was very high ($\propto = .93$).

Communication openness

Perceived openness of communication was measured by 3 five-point semantic differential items created by authors based on previous measures. This measure was intented to assess perceptions of the overall communication of the family. The stimulus question stated, "How would you describe your family communication?", and responses included open/closed, available/restricted, and clear/unclear. These items were summed and averaged to form a composite scale, with a higher score indicating more perceived openness of family communication. The reliability of this scale was good ($\propto = .81$).

Dummy Variables for Symmetry of Conflict Styles

Because hypotheses proposed differences in symmetrical and asymmetrical families, dummy variables were created to test for symmetry in family conflict styles. Two variables were created, one for individual strategy preference and one for family conflict style or level of symmetry.

Individual strategy preference

For each individual family member (young adult, mother, father), frequencies were run on all three conflict strategies. Individuals were then assigned a number which corresponded to the strategy they employed most frequently (integrative, distributive, or passive indirect). The predominant strategy (highest mean) was coded as the individual's predominant conflict style.

Family conflict style symmetry score

Individuals' conflict strategy preferences were compared within family triads, and a family score was given based on the presence or absence of symmetry of these family members' scores. Symmetrical families, families whose members all reported predominant use of the same conflict style, were coded zero. Asymmetrical families, those whose members did not have identical individual conflict style preferences, were coded 1. Table 1 reports the frequency of various combinations of family conflict styles found in this study.

Table 1
Frequencies and Constellations of Family and Individual Conflict Styles

Young Adult	Mother	Father	Frequency
I	I	I	40
PI	I	I	6
I	PI	I	5
I	I	PI	5
I	I	D	2
I	PI	PI	2
PI	D	I	2
PI	PI	D	1
I	PI	D	1
I	D	I	1
D	I	I	1
PI	D	PI	1
D	D	I	1
D	D	PI	1
D	I	D	1
PI	PI	I	1
I	D	D	1

Total			
	I = 57	I = 55	I = 57
	D = 4	D = 7	D = 6
	PI = 11	PI = 10	PI = 9

I = Integrative
D = Distributive
PI = Passive-Indirect

Results

Tests of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis predicted individuals would most often report using integrative rather than passive-indirect and distributive conflict styles, and this was supported. To test this hypothesis, an analysis of variance was performed with an independent variable of role (young adult, mother, father) and within subject variable for style. There was no significant interaction effect or main effect for role. There was, as predicted, a significant difference in reported use of the three conflict style, $F(2,404) = 232.28$, $p < .001$. Participants reported significantly more use of integrative styles (M sample = 3.39; M young adults = 3.34; M mothers = 3.45; M fathers = 3.37), followed by passive-indirect (M sample = 1.86; M young adults = 1.89; M mothers = 1.82; M fathers = 1.87),

and finally distributive styles ($\underline{M}$ sample = 1.66; $\underline{M}$ young adults = 1.66; $\underline{M}$ mothers = 1.62; $\underline{M}$ fathers = 1.70). Follow up contrasts between the three reported conflict styles indicated integrative was significantly different from both passive-indirect and distributive styles, but passive-indirect and distributive were not significantly different.

To further understand the relations among reported use of these three conflict styles, correlations were calculated (see Table 2). Not unexpectedly, reported use of integrative conflict styles was inversely related to reported use of both passive-indirect ($\underline{r}$ = -.24; $\underline{p}$ < .001) and distributive styles ($\underline{r}$ = -.17; $\underline{p}$ < .01) while reported use of passive-indirect styles was directly related ($\underline{r}$ = .44; $\underline{p}$ < .001) to reported use of distributive styles.

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Table 2
Correlation Matrix

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	I	D	PI CO	SC	CCS
Integrative Conflict Style (I)	-.18*	-.29**	-.37**	-.17	-.17
Distributive Conflict Style (D)		.42**	.23*	.21*	.21*
Passive-Indirect Style (PI)			.46**	.28**	-.20*
Communication Openness (CO)				.28**	-.08
Satisfaction with Communication (SC)					.02
Change of Conflict Style (CCS)					

** p < .001
* p < .01

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 predicted family members would most frequently report managing conflict with symmetrical rather than asymmetrical conflict styles, and this hypothesis was not supported by the chi-square test. Frequencies were performed on the conflict style variable by family style (see Table 1), and 55% of the families ($\underline{n}$ = 40) reported matching or symmetrical conflict styles with 45% ($\underline{n}$ = 32) being asymmetrical.

Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 predicted families with symmetrical conflict styles would report more satisfaction with conflict than families with asymmetrical conflict styles, and this was not supported. Results of a t-test revealed no significant difference in satisfaction with conflict, t (211) = .80, p = .43, between symmetrical families ($\underline{M}$ = 3.81; $\underline{SD}$ = .96) and asymmetrical families ($\underline{M}$ = 3.71; $\underline{SD}$ = .85). To further understand differences in satisfaction, an analysis of variance was performed on satisfaction by family style (symmetrical/asymmetrical) and role (mother, father, young adult). There were no significant main or interaction effects for satisfaction with conflict.

Correlations were also calculated for satisfaction with conflict with reported use of the three conflict styles (see Table 2). Satisfaction with conflict was inversely correlated with both distributive ($\underline{r}$ = -.17, $\underline{p}$ < .01) and passive-indirect ($\underline{r}$ = -.29, $\underline{p}$ < .001) styles, and it was directly related to use of integrative styles ($\underline{r}$ = .67, $\underline{p}$ < .001). That is, people who reported more satisfaction with conflict reported less use of both distributive and passive-indirect styles and more use of integrative conflict styles.

Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis 4 predicted families with symmetrical conflict styles would report more open family communication than families with asymmetrical conflict styles, and this was supported. The t-test revealed a significant difference between symmetrical and asymmetrical families on openness of communication, t (206) = 2.62, $\underline{p}$ < .01. Symmetrical families reported more openness of communication ($\underline{M}$ = 3.56; $\underline{SD}$ = 1.50) than asymmetrical families ($\underline{M}$ = 3.04; $\underline{SD}$ = 1.36). To further understand these differences in openness, an analysis of variance was performed on openness of communication by family style (symmetrical/asymmetrical) and role (young adult, mother, father). The same significant main effect for style was found, $\underline{F}$ (1, 202) = 7.02, $\underline{p}$ < .01, but there was no significant main effect for role or significant interaction effect.

Correlations were also calculated for openness of communication with the three conflict styles (see Table 2). Communication openness was inversely correlated with both distributive ($\underline{r}$ = -.12; $\underline{p}$ < .01) and passive-indirect styles ($\underline{r}$ = -.19; $\underline{p}$ < .01), and it was directly related to integrative styles ($\underline{r}$ = .34; $\underline{p}$ < .001). That is, people who perceived their family communication as open reported less use of both distributive and passive-indirect styles and more use of integrative conflict styles.

Discussion

Of the four hypotheses proposed in this study, two were rejected. The majority of families reported symmetrical conflict management rather than asymmetrical management, but the difference was not statistically significant given the sample size. Although the differences between the number of groups reporting symmetry and asymmetry was not large (55% symmetrical, 45% asymmetrical), what is overwhelmingly evident is that the *only* instances in which symmetry of conflict styles exist within family triads is *when all members use integrative styles*. From the 72 families sampled, there was not one instance in which a family reported distributive or passive-indirect symmetry. As young adults move toward relational symmetry (decreased dependence) with their parents, familial conflict styles may be reflective of that symmetry. There are also implications for these findings for theories of power dependency. The fact that so many families reported symmetrically integrative conflict styles can lead to the conclusion that families in the launching stage may indeed be redistributing power toward more equity among members.

In this study, participants with symmetrical conflict styles did not differ significantly from participants with asymmetrical styles with regard to satisfaction with conflict. Further, there were no significant differences in satisfaction with conflict among young adults, mothers, and fathers. It was predicted that asymmetrical conflict styles would be more likely to result in lower satisfaction because asymmetry can result in negative communication patterns. A significant correlation was found, however, between non-integrative styles and satisfaction: family members who reported communication satisfaction reported less use of passive-indirect and distributive styles. This gives support to the notion that passive-indirect and distributive styles contribute to decreased satisfaction with communication in relationships (or vice versa), a finding supported in recent research on family conflict styles (Greene, Parker, & Serovich, 1991). Satisfaction with conflict was also strongly associated with reported use of integrative conflict styles.

Symmetrical families do report more communicative openness, and family members who perceive communication as open in their triad rely upon integrative conflict styles. Individuals who report open family communication report more use of integrative styles and less use of both distributive and passive-indirect conflict styles. This supports the conclusion generally drawn by conflict theorists regarding win-win approaches to conflict resolution: individuals who are in environments   where communication transactions are relatively free and unrestricted are generally better able to resolve disputes integratively (see Hocker & Wilmot, 1985).

Riskin and Faunce (1972) have argued that, although many researchers purport to study the family, most family studies examine only individuals within the family or, at best, particular family dyads. The present study goes further than assessing *individual* family members' perceptions of family conflict, rather, this examination investigates the family triad. It is precisely this strength that contributes to perhaps what is the most important finding in this study: families engage in symmetry of conflict styles only when integrative approaches are used. That is, they mirror each other's conflict styles only in situations where conflict is managed integratively. Distributive styles and passive-indirect styles are not symmetrically adopted by mothers, fathers, and their young adults. Such a finding would not be possible without examining intact families. Surveying unrelated groups of young adults and parents in the launching stage has indicated a trend toward use of integrative styles in general (e.g., Greene et al., 1991) but cannot reveal the important relations between parents' and their young adults' conflict styles within a family.

Implications

The implications of these findings are important for family therapists, social workers, and school counselors. As noted previously, individual conflict styles may be directly affected by the styles of other family members, and the family system is directly affected by the synergistic interplay of personal conflict styles. In other words, a family member's conflict style may depend to a degree upon styles used by other family members. Ascertaining the styles of conflict family members individually and collectively adopt as well as how these are employed may be one way to address communication difficulties, and this can be important for several reasons.

First, information about conflict styles could serve to educate family members about their general interaction patterns. For example, young adults who use ineffective strategies when communicating with parents, or parents who use ineffective strategies when communicating with young adults, might be taught more effective strategies. Counselors or social workers who work in school settings might devise programs which help youth and their parents identify styles of conflict and work to develop strategies tailored for their relational needs. The launching stage of the family life cycle presents a transition that some families may find particularly difficult, and productive communication strategies adopted before this time might be invaluable. Such programs could be especially useful in middle school settings where skills can be integrated into the family system before the adolescent enters the purportedly conflictual launching period.

Secondly, while effective communication has been stressed for couples in marriage therapy, it might also be possible to teach entire families how to deal

with conflict productively. Family therapists might consider developing programs which help families identify their conflict strategies and assess their effectiveness (see Openshaw, Mills, Adams, & Durso, 1992; Sternberg, 1994; Wolcott & Weston, 1994). These kinds of programs could be particularly beneficial for blended families where conflict styles are likely to be more diverse.

Limitations

Several limitations must be considered when examining these data. While much of the strength of this study lies in the examination of the family triad, the surveys used for the young adults asked only about conflict with their parents and did not ask separately about conflict with mothers and fathers. Possibly, differences in conflict management could emerge if the participants were asked about their personal styles as applied to each parent. Also, there is a basic assumption in this research regarding families. Only two parent households were included in this research, and this does not account for differences in divorced families or single-parent homes.

In addition, some results may be linked to the gender inequity of the sample. The young adult sample was primarily female, and some studies report gender differences in reported use of conflict styles. Women, for example, have been reported to rely more heavily upon integrative and passive-indirect styles (Baird & Bradley, 1979; Berryman-Fink & Brunner, 1987; Rahim, 1983; Todd-Mancillas & Rossi, 1985), although there are studies which report no significant gender-related differences in use of conflict management techniques (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Winke, 1979; Sternberg & Soriano, 1984). In contrast to the unequal gender distribution in the young adult sample, there were an equal number of mothers and fathers, and it has traditionally been particularly difficult to gather data from fathers.

One additional potential limitation may lie in operationalizations of the conflict strategies which may have biased respondents toward the more socially acceptable styles. The integrative strategy is the most positive approach to conflict management; thus, reports of frequency of its use may be exaggerated in this study. Clearly, it is the "strategy of choice" in terms of social appeal for a majority within the American culture. It is possible that individuals who believe they possess a less desirable style would actually report using a more socially preferred strategy. Stronger operationalizations could decrease any social desirability that may be present, and inclusion of a social desirability scale might help determine if this is indeed problematic. Moreover, diversifying the sample will be necessary in future studies because research has indicated that families from cultures such as Hispanic/Latino families may be biased toward or against particular approaches to conflict management (see Hines, Garcia-Preto,

McGoldrick, Almeida, & Weltman, 1992; Marin & Marin, 1991). Although the possibility of social desirability does exist, these data show remarkably high reports of what have been previously identified as socially undesirable strategies (distributive and passive-indirected). The extra measures taken to ensure anonymity should be noted by future researchers who are concerned about this type of bias. The homogeneity of the present sample in regard to race (predominantly Caucasian) is also a limitation.

Future Research

Subsequent conflict researchers should consider the dynamic relationships between interactants. The present study indicates an individual's approach to conflict resolution may be linked to styles used by other group members (in this case, family members). Future researchers should investigate how a family member's conflict style is related to styles used by other family members. Most importantly, researchers should focus upon analysis of the relation between integrative styles and symmetry, and non-integrative styles and asymmetry. That symmetry exists only when an integrative approach is used is a finding that begs for further investigation.

In addition, families should be examined beyond the triad group. Considering entire family units (which would include siblings and perhaps extended family members) would provide better insights into the issue of symmetry of conflict styles. This includes the possible intergenerational transmission of conflict style, and longitudinal studies which trace development of conflict styles would be extremely valuable. It would be interesting to trace changes in conflict styles and investigate if change by one member is indeed mirrored by other family members. In the future, researchers may want to adopt a more systemic orientation to enhance understanding of conflict styles throughout the entire family group. One important way to do this would be to ask family members to rate or assess conflict styles used by other family members; whether or not their perceptions "match" would be an interesting direction for exploration. Inclusion of perception of power in the family and salience of conflict (perhaps by topic) would also be useful.

Investigating the dynamics of conflict management within the primary family triad provides communication theorists with an avenue for understanding how styles emerge within the family system. Further, such study offers insights into how mothers, fathers, and young adults perceive communication and conflict during a critical stage of the family life cycle. Conflict within families is an promising area of research for communication theorists, and this study represents one step toward understanding the intricate complexities of familial conflict.

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