

Within-Family Conflict Behaviors as Predictors of Conflict and Relationship Satisfaction in Adolescent Romantic Relations

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By late high school, both friends and adolescents' romantic partners typically act as sources of both intimacy and social support (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999). At the same time, social norms and the integration of intimacy and social support functions with recreational and sexual functions can lead to conflict. To what extent are adolescents' experiences of conflict in their friendships and their romantic relationships similar to that they experience within the family? Does similarity vary across different conflict strategies (e.g., use of reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical aggression)? Do conflict behaviors within the family predict relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships?

Two of the dilemmas of approaching these questions is whom to rely on as data sources and the extent to which similarity in an individual's experiences across situations is caused by continuity in their own behavior, continuity in their perceptions of others, or is evoked by their own characteristics. The social relations model (SRM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000) is designed to address these issues through the analysis of round robin data in which each member of a group (a) reports on their own behavior with every other group member and (b) reports on the behavior of all other group members towards them. SRM creates latent variables representing the (a) constancy of one's own behavior and one's ratings across others targets, (b) constancy in the perception of others of the individual and themselves with regards to the target and (c) qualities that are unique to a particular relationship. In this paper, SRM was used to analyze the conflict behavior of family members. Two questions about within-family conflict were addressed:

- 1) Is there agreement among family members about the conflict behavior of others?
- 2) How do family members organize their perceptions of others' conflict behavior?
- 2) Does how I see others predict how I am seen by others?

Next, focusing on the target adolescent, latent variables representing agreement among parents about adolescents' conflict behaviors were used to predict friends' and romantic partners' perception of adolescents' conflict strategies in those relationships. Specifically, we addressed the questions:

- 1) Do adolescents' romantic partners and friends see adolescents' the same way that parents do?, and
- 2) Do parents' perceptions of adolescents' conflict behaviors within the family predict adolescents' reports of the quality of their romantic relationships over and above the romantic partner's perceptions of adolescents' conflict behaviors predict ?

Methods

Sample and Procedure. The present study involves 58 mother-father-adolescent family

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groups, the target adolescents' dating partners, and 30 same-sex friends of the target adolescents. Participants were recruited through direct phone solicitation, announcements in area schools, churches, and recreational sites, and through word of mouth. All families were initially recruited through identification of a target adolescent in their junior or senior year in high school who was currently involved in a romantic relationship lasting four weeks or longer. After the target adolescent and their romantic partner were recruited into the study, they were videorecorded engaging in a series of conversations with their partners and completed a range of questionnaires concerning their relations with their current romantic partner, their parents, their closest same-sex friend, and their parents' marriage. Currently married parents of one member of the adolescent romantic couple were then contacted and recruited to participate in a procedure identical to that of the dating adolescents, save that they did not report on their own parents' marriage. Parents who were not willing to be videorecorded (20 of 58 married couples) were mailed home the questionnaire component of the protocol. Each adolescent also nominated a same-sex best friend to participate in the study. Of those nominated who agreed to complete a mail-home questionnaire, 30 were nominated by the friend of an adolescent whose parents had also participated.

Measures. All participants completed the Conflict in Relationship Scale (Wolfe, Wekerle, Reitzel-Jaffe, & Lefebvre, 1998). Three subscales were created to capture different types of conflict behavior. *Rational* argument included three items (I gave this person reasons for my side of the argument, I gave reasons why I thought this person was wrong, and I discussed the issue calmly with this person). *Verbal Aggression* included 11 items (sample items: This person brought up something bad that I had done in the past; This person said things just to make me angry; This person spoke to me in a hostile or mean tone of voice). *Physical Aggression* included 8 items (sample items: I destroyed or threatened to destroy something this person valued; I threw something at this person; I kicked, hit, or punched this person). For each item, raters reported on how frequently they had engaged in this behavior during a conflict with the target other during the last year (Never: 0; 1-2 times: 1; 3-5 times: 2; or 6 or more time: 3) and how often the target person had engaged in the behavior towards them. Adolescents' reported on conflict strategies in their relations with their mother, father, romantic partner, and same-sex best friend. Parents' reported on them with regards to each other and the adolescent. Romantic partners and same-sex friends reported on them with regard to the target adolescent. Mean scores were calculated on each scale towards each partner. *Relationship satisfaction* was measured using the Quality Marriage Index (Norton, 1983).

Results

In the first set of analyses, SRM was used to examine adolescent, mother, and father reports of conflict within the family. In these analyses, data is derived from 58 families of three individuals each, each rating two other family members on three dimensions. In the first phase of the SRM analysis, variance in ratings was partitioned into that which was common to the rater across targets, common to the target across raters, and relationship specific. Results are reported in Table 1. For all aspects of conflict behavior, raters saw significant commonality of behaviors across targets and in their own behavior across targets. There was significant agreement across raters concerning targets' emotional and physical aggression, but not in their use of rational arguments. No significant consensus emerged concerning raters' perceptions of their own behavior towards particular targets. Thus although people saw similarity (a) across others in behavior and (b) in themselves with others, there was no consensus within families that

particular individuals evoked particular types of conflict behaviors (i.e there was no significant shared variance of self-ratings across raters).

Table 1: Percentage of Variance Partitioned into Effects of the Target towards Others, Others Toward Target, and Relationship Specific Variance			
	Similarity of Targets Across Ratings	Similarity of Target Across Raters	Relationship Specific
<u>Rating of Others</u> Rational	58.8*	6.5	34.7
Verbal Aggression	50.0*	34.2*	15.7
Physical Aggression	44.9*	35.5*	19.6
<u>Ratings of Self</u> Rational	73.9*	02.4	23.7
Verbal Aggression	66.5*	07.6	26.0
Physical Aggression	41.9*	24.7	33.4

In the second phase of the SRM analyses, the interrelationship of the latent variables derived from the within-family SRM conflict analyses were examined. Correlations are reported in Table 2. The top part of the table describes actor effects: the correlations between the latent variables capturing what raters say about others and what raters say about themselves with others (actor effects). Results indicate that in rating others, there is a strong correlation between raters' assessments of the physical and emotional aggression of others. There is no significant association between how one rates others in use of rational argument and how one rates others' use of emotional and physical aggression. When one rates oneself with others, use of rational argument and emotional aggression are *positively* correlated (they are unrelated when rating others).

At the bottom of Table 2, the correlation between latent variables capturing consensus of raters concerning target individuals are reported (partner effects). These correlations are strikingly higher than those concerning how raters rate others. Importantly, the difference between actor and partner effects indicates that the consensus about individuals is not due to halo effects by raters. In terms of general agreement about target individuals, raters' assessment of others' use of rational argument is strongly negatively correlated with ratings of physical and emotional aggression. Assessment of physical and emotional aggression are strongly positively correlated with one another. Thus consensus concerning target individuals across raters is organized such that emotional and physical aggression are highly positively correlated with one another and negatively correlated with use of rational argument.

Table 2: Correlation of Actor and Partner Effects on Conflict Behaviors Within the Family. Actor effects reflect how a rater generally rates other family members. Partner effects are how raters generally rate a target individual.

	Actor Effects		
	Use of Rational Arguments	Verbal Aggression	Physical Aggression
Rational	--	- .0104	-.2248
Verbal Aggression	.3360	--	.5967**
Physical Aggression	.1148	.3978	--
	Partner Effects		
Rational	--	-.8630**	-.8601**
Verbal Aggression	-1.0000**	--	.7556**
Physical Aggression	-.9144**	.2185	--

In the third phase of the SRM analysis, the commonality across targets in how raters assess their own and others' behaviors (actor effects) were correlated with consensus across raters in how targets are seen (partner effects). In other words, are people who generally see others as aggressive seen to be aggressive themselves? Results are reported in Table 3. Individuals who see others as emotionally and physically aggressive are seen to be emotionally and physically aggressive by others. On the other hand, there is no evidence that the extent to which one sees oneself acting with others is associated with how others' see themselves acting towards oneself. If one assumes that shared consensus of raters about an individual is a more objective assessment than an individual's tendency to rate others in a particular way, this suggests that people who see aggression in those around them are more likely to be aggressive than others.

Table 3: Actor-Partner correlations of ratings of conflict behaviors	
	Actor-Partner Do how I see others predict how I am seen by others?
Ratings of Others with Self	
Rational Argument	.285
Emotional Aggression	.664*
Physical Aggression	.650*
Ratings of Self with Others	
Rational Argument	.050
Emotional Aggression	.497
Physical Aggression	.456

In the next series of analyses, parents' ratings of adolescents' conflict strategies (the results of the Partner Effects SRM analysis for adolescents) were correlated with romantic partners' and same-sex friends' ratings on the same strategies. Results are reported in Table 4. Results indicate that only parents' ratings of physical aggression were significantly related to romantic partners' ratings of physical aggression. Thus there is very limited evidence for continuity of conflict strategies from family to romantic relationships or same-sex friendships.

Table 4: Correlation between Parents' Ratings of Adolescents' Conflict Behavior (Partner Effects) and Romantic Partners' and Same-Sex Friends' Ratings of Adolescents' Conflict Behaviors		
	Romantic Partner	Same-Sex Friend
Rational Argument	.02	.13
Emotional Aggression	.15	-.15
Physical Aggression	.34***	-.05

How are parents' and romantic partners' perceptions of adolescents' conflict strategies related to adolescents' satisfaction with their romantic relationships? Regression analyses were performed predicting adolescents' satisfaction with their romantic relationships from parents' and partners' perceptions of their behavior. Results are reported in Table 6. Parents' reports of adolescents' use of rational arguments was associated with higher romantic satisfaction and partner's reports of use of emotional aggression was associated with lower relationship satisfaction. (Correlational analyses suggest that the direction of effects is not due to over-control factors.)

Table 5: Multiple regression model predicting adolescents' romantic satisfaction from parents' and partners' perceptions of their conflict strategies

	B	Std. Error	t	Sig.
Intercept	7.71	0.81	9.57	0.00
Parents' Ratings: Rational	0.76	0.35	2.19	0.03
Parents' Ratings: Emotional Aggression	0.06	0.39	0.15	0.88
Parents' Ratings: Physical Aggression	-0.22	0.60	-0.36	0.72
Partner's Ratings: Rational	0.01	0.23	0.06	0.96
Partner's Ratings: Emotional Aggression	-1.31	0.45	-2.91	0.01
Partner's Ratings: Physical Aggression	0.71	0.41	1.74	0.09

Multiple R²=.27, N=57

Discussion

One of the dilemmas of having multiple informants about close relationships is that it is difficult to interpret differences in reported behavior by informant and by context. In this case, where information about use of conflict strategies is provided by self-, partner, parents, and peers, the complexity can seem overwhelming. Several important issues emerge from the findings, however.

First, from Table 1, we find that there seems to be significant commonality in how individuals rate all those they interact with. Whether this commonality captures true 'bias' in how individuals' perceive their social relationships or 'bias' in the sense of how individuals report on them is unclear.

Second, from Tables 1 and 2, we find that family members are in agreement about who is both physically and emotionally aggressive, and that when someone is seen as aggressive, they are unlikely to be seen as making frequent use of rational argument. In other words, family members perceive a constellation of high physical aggression and emotional aggression, combined with infrequent use of rational argument and there is significant agreement across raters about which individuals are so characterized. This does not appear to be due to a 'halo effect' due to rater bias. Third, within the family, the perception of aggression appears to be reciprocal. If I see others as aggressive, I am seen to be aggressive by them (Table 3). This is consistent with the interpretation that reports reflect a true perceptual bias in the rater. It is also consistent with previous work on negative cognitive bias and rejection sensitivity and their association with use of the aggression.

Fourth, there is little consistency in how adolescents are said to act during conflict within the family with how their romantic partners and their friends see them (Table 4). Yet both behavior within the family (rational argument) and use of verbal aggression as reported by romantic partners predicts adolescents' reports of satisfaction with their romantic relationships surprisingly well.

Two additional points emerge more subtly from these data that came to me while pondering the dilemma of why there is so little agreement between perceptions of the adolescent within the family and perception of the adolescent in relationships outside the family. For people who do observational research on adolescent conflict behaviors in romantic relationships, this may strike a chord. In this study, we observed parents who had been married for 20 or more years engaging in a discussion of conflict in the laboratory. In every case, it was easy for the couples to come up with at least one issue that each partner wanted to talk about. Good marriage or bad, after 20 years there was always something to talk about. This was not true, however, when we asked our romantic couples to engage in the same discussion. One of our coders would

consistently joke that if the topic they chose was where to go on dates, they essentially had no conflict in the relationship. We did not observe same-sex friends, but I expect a similar pattern would emerge. Within families, which are relatively involuntary, obligatory relationships, conflicts will occur. This is especially true if one is talking about conflicts between parents and adolescents (as we are here). Thus within families, virtually all of the families had experienced conflict and thus individual differences within families primarily reflected the style of conflict, not the occurrence of conflict.

This is not true in adolescent romantic relationships nor in adolescent friendships. Because these relationships are voluntary, centered around leisure, likely to dissolve if highly conflictual, and often do not involve shared tasks, conflict is less likely to occur. Thus individual differences in ratings of conflict behaviors reflect both individual differences in the *style* of conflict resolution behaviors when conflict does occur and the *frequency* of conflict - if it has occurred at all. These differences will increase the difficulty of finding continuity when the behavior is often evoked in one setting and evoked in the other only in some of the relationships.

Similarly, the range of satisfaction with romantic relationships was markedly wider among long-married parents than among currently dating adolescents. There is little to keep an adolescent romantic couple together if they are seriously unhappy with their relationship. Thus restrictions in range of the dependent variable (perhaps partly due to our independent variables!) may limit our ability to understand adolescents' relationships using the same models we understand their parents'.

