UNDERSTANDING MOTHER-ADOLESCENT CONFLICT DISCUSSIONS: CONCURRENT AND ACROSS-TIME PREDICTION FROM YOUTHS’ DISPOSITIONS AND PARENTING

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT vii

I. INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK 1

II. SAMPLE AND MEASURES 31

III. DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSES AND CORRELATIONS 54

IV. GROWTH CURVES, PREDICTION OF CONFLICT REACTIONS FROM GROWTH CURVES, AND TESTS OF MEDIATED RELATIONS 81

V. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION 123

REFERENCES 148

COMMENTARY

CONFLICTING VIEWS OF CONFLICT
Judith G. Smetana 161

PUTTING CONFLICT IN CONTEXT
Nancy Darling 169

CONTRIBUTORS 176

STATEMENT OF EDITORIAL POLICY 179
ABSTRACT

Adolescence is often thought of as a period during which the quality of parent–child interactions can be relatively stressed and conflictual. There are individual differences in this regard, however, with only a modest percent of youths experiencing extremely conflictual relationships with their parents. Nonetheless, there is relatively little empirical research on factors in childhood or adolescence that predict individual differences in the quality of parent–adolescent interactions when dealing with potentially conflictual issues. Understanding such individual differences is critical because the quality of both parenting and the parent–adolescent relationship is predictive of a range of developmental outcomes for adolescents.

The goals of the research were to examine dispositional and parenting predictors of the quality of parents’ and their adolescent children’s emotional displays (anger, positive emotion) and verbalizations (negative or positive) when dealing with conflictual issues, and if prediction over time supported continuity versus discontinuity in the factors related to such conflict. We hypothesized that adolescents’ and parents’ conflict behaviors would be predicted by both childhood and concurrent parenting and child dispositions (and related problem behaviors) and that we would find evidence of both parent- and child-driven pathways.

Mothers and adolescents (N = 126, M age = 13 years) participated in a discussion of conflictual issues. A multimethod, multireporter (mother, teacher, and sometimes adolescent reports) longitudinal approach (over 4 years) was used to assess adolescents’ dispositional characteristics (control/regulation, resiliency, and negative emotionality), youths’ externalizing problems, and parenting variables (warmth, positive expressivity, discussion of emotion, positive and negative family expressivity). Higher quality conflict reactions (i.e., less negative and/or more positive) were related to both concurrent and antecedent measures of children’s dispositional characteristics and externalizing problems, with findings for control/regulation and negative emotionality being much more consistent for daughters than sons. Higher quality conflict reactions were also related to higher quality
parenting in the past, positive rather than negative parent–child interactions during a contemporaneous nonconflictual task, and reported intensity of conflict in the past month. In growth curves, conflict quality was primarily predicted by the intercept (i.e., initial levels) of dispositional measures and parenting, although maintenance or less decrement in positive parenting, greater decline in child externalizing problems, and a greater increase in control/regulation over time predicted more desirable conflict reactions. In structural equation models in which an aspect of parenting and a child dispositional variable were used to predict conflict reactions, there was continuity of both type of predictors, parenting was a unique predictor of mothers’ (but not adolescents’) conflict reactions (and sometimes mediated the relations of child dispositions to conflict reactions), and child dispositions uniquely predicted adolescents’ reactions and sometimes mothers’ conflict reactions. The findings suggest that parent–adolescent conflict may be influenced by both child characteristics and quality of prior and concurrent parenting, and that in this pattern of relations, child effects are more evident than parent effects.