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SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

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PROJECT TITLE: A Mediatonal Analysis of Marital Quality and
the Intergenerational Transmission of Conflict and Support

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: [Signature], Faculty Mentor

Date: 12-8-04

Comments (Optional):

Shye has done a good job with a difficult paper - she tackled some complex analyses with our help & has shown a good understanding of them that is commensurate with her level of experiences. This work is well done given it is her first ever attempt at writing a research paper in APA style & reporting such complex analyses. Consequently, I think this is definitely honors work.

Running head: MARITAL QUALITY, CONFLICT, AND SUPPORT

A Mediational Analysis of Marital Quality and the
Intergenerational Transmission of Conflict and Support

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Abstract

The researchers investigate the intergenerational transmission of conflict and support and their effects upon marital quality. The following four hypotheses are investigated: (a) Parents' Conflict predicts Offspring's Spouse's Marital Quality, (b) Parents' Support predicts Offspring's Spouse's Marital Quality, (c) Offspring's Conflict mediates the relationship between Parents' Conflict and Offspring's Spouse's Conflict, and (d) Offspring's Support mediates the relationship between Parents' Support and Offspring's Spouse's Conflict. Data is collected from 221 couples from marriage enrichment seminars; each partner fills out selected sections of the Communication Patterns Questionnaire and the Quality of Marriage Index and a shortened version of the Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire. The first, second, and fourth hypotheses are not supported; however, it is found that the third hypotheses are supported, with regression analysis reporting full mediation. Implications of results and future study are discussed.

A Mediational Analysis of Marital Quality and the Intergenerational Transmission of Conflict and Support

The prevention of divorce and the enhancement of already successful relationships have been important concentrations within the psychological community within the past few decades. In 2002, the probability of first marriages ending in divorce within ten years was 33%, while the probability of second marriages ending was 39% (National Center for Health Statistics, 2002). The rate of divorce is steadily increasing in the U.S. Moreover, divorce can cause financial hardship, social isolation, or continuing conflicts with the ex-spouse (Tein, Sandler, & Zautra, 2000) and is known to be a psychologically distressing experience for those involved. Many researchers have found that the most reported cause of divorce and poor marital functioning is poor communication (e.g., Davis & Aron, 1988). A person's communication skills are very important for his or her quality of marital functioning (Perrone & Worthington, 2001) and are influenced by individual characteristics. According to Kearns and Leonard (2004), much of the literature available has concentrated on how individuals' qualities or dyadic attributes influence relationship growth or deterioration. Two specific attributes that researchers have found to be particularly associated with marital functioning are conflict and support.

Marital Quality can be defined as a general feeling of marital satisfaction or the experienced evaluation of the marital relationship (Schaap, Buunk, & Kerkstra, 1988, p. 209) and it has been shown to be correlated with both conflict (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002) and social support (Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994; Brunstein, Dangelmayer, & Schultheiss, 1996). In a randomly sampled, nationwide phone survey of adults in married, engaged, and cohabiting relationships, negative interaction and conflict between partners was found to be negatively correlated with numerous measures of relationship quality and positively correlated with divorce

potential (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Other studies support these findings as well; in an observational study of husbands' and wives' dysphoria, or frustrated depression, for instance, dysphoria levels were related to particular negative marital conflict expression (Schudlich, Papp, & Cummings, 2004).

In addition, social support within the marital dyad has received increasing attention recently. In an observational study conducted by Pasch and Bradbury (1998), couples that exhibited poor social support skills were at particular risk for later marital dysfunction. Other research has expounded upon this, finding that positive individual behaviors in the social support domain are related to marital quality, and they convey information not already captured by the assessment of communication in the conflict domain (Julien, Chartrand, Simard, Bouthillier, & Begin, 2003, p.425).

Researchers have found that these two aspects of marital functioning, conflict and support, are intergenerationally transmitted via observational learning (Fincham, Grych, & Osborne, 1994; Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000, respectively). In the former article, the authors state that "marital conflict is a stressful or challenging event that accentuates preexisting characteristics and allows existing vulnerabilities to be realized as adaptation failures" (Fincham, Grych, & Osborne, 1994, p.138). In the latter study, the researchers found that offspring's quality of marriage was correlated with parents' supportive behaviors; this association was mediated by the quality of the offspring's affective behaviors toward their partners (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000). According to Amato and Booth (2001), people learn conflictual and supportive behaviors from their homes-of-origin and bring these behaviors into their subsequent marriages. These researchers have shown through their investigation that parents' marital discord is negatively related to offspring's marital harmony and positively related to offspring's

marital discord (Amato & Booth, 2001). Social learning theory agrees with this, postulating that “behavioral differences between individuals must be the result of the different learning conditions each person has experienced during his/her upbringing” (Schaap, Buunk, & Kerkstra, 1988, p. 206). Katz and Gottman (1993) found that marital interaction patterns are related to specific forms of child outcomes; for instance, the Mutually Hostile pattern predicts externalizing behavior patterns in children. Much research has found correlations between parents’ and offspring’s marital discord and patterns of communication (e.g., Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004; David & Murphy, 2004). For a more thorough review of the intergenerational transmission of marital conflict, please see Amato and Booth’s 2001 article.

Social support behaviors as well as conflict have been known to be transmitted across generations. In an investigation of Gottman’s couple-conflict types, Holman and Jarvis (2003) found that couples with the poorest relationship quality are those that are low in positive communication and soothing and high in hostile communication practices. These findings are consistent with the interpersonal competence hypothesis. This premise states that interpersonal behaviors high in warmth and low in hostility, and linked to experiences in the family of origin, should be positively associated with the quality of early adult romantic relationships (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000).

In response to the great amount of literature supporting the correlation between parental and offspring marital quality, the authors propose two hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that offspring reported levels of parental conflict will predict offspring’s marital quality. Hypothesis Two holds that offspring reported levels of parents’ marital support will predict offspring’s marital quality.

Researchers have given most of their attention to the individual qualities that affect marriages (Kearns & Leonard, 2001, p. 383); however, this aspect of marital interaction has not been viewed as extensively from the perspective of the spouses of the offspring from the marriages in question. While self-reports and observational studies have been very useful in studying the various aspects of marital functioning, this appears to be one method of measurement that has not received a large amount of attention. It stands to reason that when measuring for the intergenerational transmission of a construct, if that construct is perceived by and is reported to affect the spouse, then the hypothesized intergenerational transmission is supported. Every relationship is composed of dyadic qualities; that is to say that a meaningful relationship encompassing both parties and its attributes affect each individual partner. Therefore, if there is a problem in the relationship, itself brought by Partner A, then Partner B should feel its effects. To bring in the intergenerational hypothesis, if Partner A brings to the relationship a quality that he learned from his family of origin, then Partner B should not only notice its effects on the relationship but also be affected by that quality because the relationship itself affects both partners. Thus, it is likely that if the intergenerationally transmitted marital functioning variables are measured from the viewpoint of the offspring's spouse, it will bridge a gap in the literature and provide additional support for the intergenerational transmission hypothesis.

The authors of this paper assume, therefore, intergenerational transmission and observational learning to be so pervasive that their effects upon marital quality, conflict, and support are likely to be experienced not only by the offspring, but by the spouse of the offspring as well. The effects of parental qualities should affect the spouse's qualities through the functioning of the offspring. It is likely that offspring's reports of the marital functioning variables of marital quality, conflict, and support will mediate the spouse's outcomes according

to the specifications of Baron and Kenny (1986), thereby giving support to the intergenerational transmission hypothesis. Therefore, the third hypothesis is that offspring perceived parental conflict will predict spouses' reported levels of marital conflict and will be mediated by the offspring's reported marital conflict. The final hypothesis presented is that offspring reported levels of parents' marital support will predict support reported by spouses and will be mediated by the reported support of the offspring.

Method

Participants

Participants initially consisted of 300 married couples attending a local marital enrichment seminar. However, due to missing data, the number of participating couples was pared down to $n = 221$. The sample was predominantly Euro-American, with 192 Caucasian males and 197 females. The average age of the sample (range = 21—79) was 45.61 ($SD = 11.520$) for husbands and 42.91 ($SD = 11.788$) for wives. Average length of marriage was 15 years, from a range of engaged and newlywed couples to those that had been married for 55 years plus, and couples averaged 2.35 children. The average family income was \$75,000—99,999, with a range of \$10,000—over 250,000. The average number of years of education was 16.05 ($SD = 2.799$) for husbands and 15.13 ($SD = 3.463$) for wives; the majority of both husbands and wives had completed up to either their associate's or bachelor's degrees. Couples filled out a series of pre- and post-seminar questionnaires, along with several follow-up measures.

Procedure

Data for this particular study was gathered as part of a larger empirical evaluation of the effectiveness of the seminar. With the full cooperation and support of seminar presenters,

participants were recruited from every seminar locality from March to August 2004. Couples attending the seminar and who agreed to participate in the study were instructed to fill out the packet of measures listed below. The participants were also instructed to be honest in their answers and to not share their answers with their spouse. They were also given copies of their informed consent forms to keep for their own records. As the surveys were collected, the presenters immediately sealed them into a cardboard box and mailed them to the University of Tennessee. Each seminar was designated by a specific code and each couple received their own identification number as well. The data was entered into an SPSS file and checked by trained undergraduates. The first hypothesis will be measured by asking participants to determine the level of marital support they perceive their parents to have experienced and by the Quality of Marriage Inventory or QMI (Norton, 1983). The second hypothesis will be measured through the QMI and by asking the participants to gauge the level of marital conflict experienced by his or her parents. The third hypothesis will be measured by again asking offspring about parental conflict and also through assessing the offspring and spouse's scores on the Communication Patterns Questionnaire or CPQ (Christensen & Sullaway, 1984). Finally, the fourth hypothesis will be measured by asking offspring about parental levels of support and by the self-reported levels of support experienced by the offspring and the offspring's spouse through the Social Support Scale as described below. Participation was voluntary; couples were not given any incentives to fill out the questionnaires.

Measures

Brief Biographical Data Form: This form was used to gather basic demographic information about the participants in order to provide a description of the study's sample. Participants provided their age, education level, number of years married, etc., as well as if they

had ever participated in a Marriage Alive seminar before. Participants were also asked within this form to gauge the amount of both conflict and support in their parents' marriages when they were growing up.

Quality of Marriage Index (QMI; Norton, 1983). The QMI is a measure of global marital quality. It is a brief questionnaire of six items; the item's intercorrelation scores range from .68 to .86 (Norton, 1983; Heyman, Sayers, & Bellack, 1994). The QMI is related to the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), it is a well-established measure in the field of marital research; their intercorrelations are .87 for men and .85 for women (Heyman, Sayers, & Bellack, 1994).

Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984). Using the 7-item subscale of constructive communication from this 35-item self-report measure, the researchers measured the ratings of constructiveness of spouse interaction during discussion of a problem within the relationship. The Constructive Communication scale assesses a couple's conflict resolution through mutual discussion, expression of feelings and suggestion of possible solutions (Hahlweg & Kaiser, 2000). The development of the questionnaire is described in detail in Christensen's 1988 article (Noller & White, 1990).

Social Support Scale: This measure was adapted from the Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire (NSSQ; Norbeck, 1981). Before its modification, this scale reports excellent test-retest reliability and internal consistency. Changes had to be made to this adapted, shortened version of the NSSQ, such as rewording and renumbering certain questions, in order to make the scale more appropriate for this sample. This measure was used in assessing self-reported feelings of marital support.

Results

The authors' first hypothesis states that the parental conflict perceived by the offspring would predict the level of marital quality experienced by the offspring. The authors regressed Husband's Marital Quality onto Husband's Parents' Conflict, and the results were not significant. When regressing the Wife's Marital Quality onto the Wife's Parents' Conflict variable, the concluding results are once again not significant. The second hypothesis stated that the parental support perceived by the offspring would predict the offspring's level of marital quality. However, when Husband's Marital Quality is regressed onto the Independent Variable the results are not significant and the hypothesis is not supported. When Wife's Marital Quality is regressed onto Wife's Parents' Support, the authors do not find significant results either. In sum, for both Husbands and Wives, the results indicate that Parents' Support and Parents' Conflict do not account for a significant amount of the variance in predicting current marital satisfaction as reported by the offspring.

The third hypothesis states that the Offspring's Parental Conflict would be linked to Spouse's Marital Conflict for both Husbands and Wives and that the Offspring's Conflict will mediate this relation. For the full sample of both Husbands and Wives, the authors found Parents' Conflict, Spouse's Conflict, and Offspring's Conflict are all significantly correlated and in the expected directions. Parents' Conflict appears to be significantly related to Spouse's Conflict, Spouse's Conflict to be significantly related to the Offspring's Conflict, and the Parents' Conflict to be significantly related to the Offspring's Conflict. Consequently, these significant correlations between the variables meet the first necessary conditions for mediation as outlined by Baron and Kinney (1986).

The final condition for mediation is that the initial significant association between Parents' Conflict and Spouse's Conflict no longer exists when regressing Spouse's Conflict onto both Offspring's Conflict and Parents' Conflict. This condition for mediation was met for both Husbands and Wives (see Tables 1 and 2, respectively). The regression equation for Husband's Parents' Conflict predicting Wife's Conflict, mediated by Husband's Conflict, was significant, $R^2 = .462$, $F(93.667) = 2$, $p < .0001$. The standardized beta coefficients were $-.054$, $t = -1.063$, ns, and $.668$, $t = 13.210$, $p < .0001$, for Husband's Parents' Conflict and Husband's Conflict, respectively. The regression equation for Wife's Parents' Conflict predicting Husband's Conflict, mediated by Wife's Conflict, was also significant, $R^2 = .465$, $F(94.894) = 2$, $p < .0001$. The standardized beta coefficients were $-.078$, $t = -1.568$, ns, and $.666$, $t = 13.304$, $p < .0001$ for Wife's Parents' Conflict and Wife's Conflict, respectively. Thus, as predicted, it appears that Offspring's Conflict mediates the relationship between Offspring's Parents' Conflict and Offspring's Spouse's Conflict.

The researchers' fourth and final hypothesis examines whether Offspring's Support mediates the relation between Offspring's Parents' Support and Offspring's Spouse's Support. For the full sample of both Husbands and Wives, only the correlations between Offspring and Spouse were in the expected direction. Results for the correlations between Offspring's Support and Offspring's Parents' Support were not significant, as well as those between Offspring's Parents' Support and Spouse's Support. Therefore, these correlations do not satisfy the conditions for mediation as outlined by Baron and Kinney (1986), which state that correlations between all variables must be significant in order to imply mediation (see Tables 3 and 4 for Husbands and Wives, respectively). The full regression equation including Husband's Parents' Support and Husband's Support predicted Wife's Support, $R^2 = .419$, $F(78.467) = 2$, $p < .0001$,

although the original correlations were not significant. Moreover, the standardized beta coefficients were .032, $t = .606$, ns, and .642, $t = 12.329$, $p < .0001$, Husband's Parents' Support and Husband's Support respectively. Although the correlations were not found to be significant, the full regression equation including Wife's Parents' Support and Wife's Support significantly predicted Husband's Support, $R^2 = .418$, $F(78.317) = 2$, $p < .0001$. Moreover, the standardized beta coefficients were .023, $t = .438$, ns, and .644, $t = 12.433$, $p < .0001$, for Wife's Parents' Support and Wife's Support respectively. The data shows that, although insignificant on an alpha of .05, Husband's Parents' Support better predicted Wife's Support than Wife's Parents' Support predicted Husband's Support; this could suggest a trend in the data. According to the conditions of mediation specified by Baron and Kinney (1984), it appears that for both Husbands and Wives, Offspring's Support does not mediate a relationship between Offspring's Parents and Spouse's Support.

Discussion

These results generally support the hypothesis that parents' level of conflict is transmitted to their offspring's spouse via the offspring himself; however, similar results were not found from testing the support hypothesis. Concerning the first and second hypotheses, it was found that parental support and conflict perceived by the offspring did not predict the offspring's marital quality. That the hypotheses were unsupported is surprising in light of the amount of research claiming that parents' marital quality has a causal impact upon offspring's marital quality (see Amato & Booth, 2001, for review). While researchers for the better part of the century have agreed that the "degree of marital satisfaction is increasingly attributed to the extent and quality of communication between the spouses" (Schaap, Buunk, & Kerkstra, 1988), it appears that this does not include the intergenerational transmission of parental conflict and

support. These results are dissimilar to those of Amato and Booth's (2001) mediational analysis, which suggested that parents' marital quality has a causal impact on offspring's marital quality. However, the two studies differ on many points, one of which is that the measures used by the authors of this study were somewhat short in length and were, in part, retrospective self-report measures. Self-report measures can be somewhat vague on real correlations due to the hazy and somewhat incorrect nature of retrospective answers. These constructs would be better evaluated if they were assessed using a variety of methods, such as longitudinal, observational, and self-report.

Hypothesis Three stated that the Offspring's Parental Conflict would be linked to Spouse's Marital Conflict for both Husbands and Wives and that the Offspring's Conflict would mediate that relation. The authors' analyses show this prediction and its mediation to be true. This is in accordance with Amato and Booth's (2001) conjecture that if divorce is transmitted across generations, then it is likely that marital discord is too. The researchers' data supports the theory that if a construct such as intergenerationally transmitted conflict is active in a relationship, then because of the nature of relationships the spouse should be affected as well. This operates on the premise that the nature of relationships is that they unfold as a "product of both persons' working models and the fit that exists between their working models and their resulting social behavior" (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1991, p. 1037). Many studies have shown that negative communication behaviors apparent in parental relationships are also apparent in offspring relationships (e.g., Skuja & Halford, 2004). Several researchers have also postulated that "the family of origin serves as the primary setting in which children learn maladaptive interpersonal repertoires" (Story, Lawrence, Karney, & Bradbury, 2004, p.519).

The researchers' fourth and final hypothesis states that Offspring's Support will mediate the relationship between Offspring's Parents' Support and Spouse's Support. This hypothesis is not supported by the results of regression analysis. While these results are surprising in light of the literature (i.e., Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000), they do reflect the focus of the field of psychology. Psychology as a science has focused heavily upon conflict for the better part of this century; however, the new positive psychology movement indicates that researchers should not ignore social support (Carels & Baucom, 1999). Simply because the results from this study were not supported, does not mean that social support as a construct is not important. "Because of this strong focus on conflict," state Pasch and Bradbury (1998, p.219), "the field has limited knowledge of other domains of marital interaction that might contribute to the longitudinal course of marriage." Therefore, more research is needed on social support (Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994) in order for psychology as a field to truly understand the myriad intricacies of marital interaction.

While this study does bridge the gap in the literature on the intergenerational transmission of conflict, it does, however, have several limitations. The measurements used in this study were very simple; perhaps longer measures might produce different or more significant results. The researchers used an adaptation of the Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire, and, while this is an acceptable form of scientific investigation, the shortened form of this measure might not yield the same results as the original version.

As a field, psychology needs to consider what exactly contributes to the notion of social support (Brunstein, Dangelmayer, & Schultheiss, 1996). Perhaps individuals interpret support in different ways. Psychologists need to utilize investigations that can adequately measure these possibly varying definitions of social support. This study does show that there is an

intergenerational transmission effect in conflict and further research is needed to fully understand it.

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Table 1

Husband's Conflict Mediating the Relationship between Husband's Parents' Conflict and Wife's Conflict

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>p</i>
Model 1				
Husband's Parents' Conflict	-1.566	.586	-.178	.008*
Model 2				
Husband's Parents' Conflict	-.473	.445	-.054	.289
Husband's Conflict	.746	.056	.668	.000*

Note. Dependent Variable = Wife's Conflict. $R^2 = .032$ for Model 1; $R^2 = .462$ for Model 2.

* $p < .01$.

Table 2

Wife's Conflict Mediating Relation between Wife's Parents' Conflict and Husband's Conflict

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	β	<i>p</i>
Model 1				
Wife's Parents' Conflict	-1.316	.494	-.177	.008*
Model 2				
Wife's Parents' Conflict	-.583	.372	-.078	.118
Wife's Conflict	.596	.045	.666	.000*

Note. Dependent Variable = Husband's Conflict. $R^2 = .031$ for Model 1; $R^2 = .465$ for Model 2.

* $p < .01$.

Table 3

Husband's Support Mediating Relationship between Husband's Parents' Support and Wife's Support

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>p</i>
Model 1				
Husband's Parents' Support	.607	.356	.115	.089
Model 2				
Husband's Parents' Support	.167	.276	.032	.545
Husband's Support	.706	.057	.642	.000*

Note. Dependent Variable = Wife's Support. $R^2 = .013$ for Model 1; $R^2 = .419$ for Model 2.

* $p < .001$.

Table 4

Wife's Support Mediating Relationship between Wife's Parents' Support and Husband's Support

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>p</i>
Model 1				
Wife's Parents' Support	.342	.312	.074	.274
Model 2				
Wife's Parents' Support	.105	.240	.023	.662
Wife's Support	.586	.047	.644	.000*

Note. Dependent Variable = Husband's Support. $R^2 = .005$ for Model 1; $R^2 = .418$ for Model 2.

* $p < .001$.