



Marital conflict and adolescent outcomes: A cross-ethnic group comparison of Latino and European American youth

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ABSTRACT

Available research indicates a link between marital conflict and youth outcomes; however, relatively few studies examine these relationships in Latinos, the largest U.S. ethnic group. The present study examines this relationship in both Latino and European American families. Self-report data measuring externalizing and internalizing youth behaviors, along with overt and covert marital conflict, were used in analyses of 788 Latino and 751 European American adolescents. Results support current literature indicating a strong link between marital conflict and youth outcomes, regardless of ethnic group. These associations are similarly related for the differential effects of overt and covert marital conflict on externalizing and internalizing behaviors. However, overt conflict was significantly more predictive of internalizing behaviors than covert conflict. These results yield valuable information for clinical intervention and further research.

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1. Introduction

The prevalence of mental/behavioral disorders for children and adolescents has been estimated to be approximately one in five (World Health Organization, 2003), with findings generalized to numerous geographic populations worldwide (Kazdin & Weisz, 2003). Not surprisingly, the symptoms associated with these disorders pose a significant challenge in terms of key individual and relational outcomes (e.g., parent-child relationship quality, peer associations, academic performance; Essau, 2003). Annual cost estimates also demonstrate the high financial costs experienced by adolescents' families and by the various health, social services, and welfare systems associated with treatment (e.g., Foster & Jones, 2005). Furthermore, even at sub-syndromal levels, adolescent problems can all pose a significant interpersonal and financial risk to societal functioning (Kazdin & Weisz, 2003).

Although many family risk factors have been identified in relation to adolescent problem behaviors (e.g., marital satisfaction, family structure, divorce; Buehler et al., 1998; Zimet & Jacob, 2001), relational conflict has emerged as one of the more significant correlates. In fact, an extensive body of literature has linked between-parent marital/couple conflict to developmental difficulties for youth (e.g., Buehler et al., 1997; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Sheeber, Hops, & Davis, 2001; Zimet & Jacob, 2001).

However, as noted by Vendlinski, Silk, Shaw, and Lane (2006), the majority of studies have focused on externalizing behaviors with little regard for the impact of marital conflict on adolescent internalized problems. An additional methodological shortcoming is the lack of attention to the unique and combined influence of both overt and covert conflict (Buehler et al., 1997; Krishnakumar, Buehler, & Barber, 2003), as most studies have focused solely on overt conflict (Buehler et al., 1998). The purpose of this study is to address these limitations and to examine the relationships between marital conflict (overt and covert) and youth outcomes (internalized and externalized) for the two largest U.S. ethnic groups—European Americans and Latinos.

2. Literature review

When working with mentally and/or behaviorally disrupted youth, psychotherapists and community interventionists encounter presenting issues that fall under the broad categories of “externalizing” and “internalizing” problems. Buehler et al. (1998) characterized externalizing behaviors as having symptoms that are expressed toward others in the individual's environment (e.g., aggression, hyperactivity), while internalizing behaviors refer to symptoms directed towards self (e.g., depression, anxiety). In terms of definitions of marital/couple conflict, Buehler et al. (1998) suggest that overt conflict is characterized by the hostility, physical violence, insulting, and screaming, while covert conflict is evidenced by behaviors such as triangulation of the child against one's spouse and other passive-aggressive couple interactions.

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Buehler and others have also noted that the different types of conflictual behaviors (overt or covert) are differentially related to youth maladjustment (e.g., Buehler et al., 1997). In fact, findings suggest that overt conflict is specifically and most strongly related to child externalizing behaviors (Buehler et al., 1998; Bradford et al., 2004). On the other hand, covert conflict has been found to be associated with internalizing symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and withdrawal (Buehler et al., 1998; Bradford et al., 2004). It is noteworthy that these relationships (i.e., between a particular type of marital conflict and a particular type of youth outcome), have been found across 11 different cultural or national groups (Bradford et al., 2004). Not surprisingly, the inclusion of eleven diverse groups in their sample prevented in-depth examinations of group differences.

It should also be noted that the available research has primarily focused on overt marital conflict and externalizing behaviors, providing only a partial picture of how marital conflict influences child outcomes. In fact, with only two studies comparing overt and covert conflict in Latino and EA ethnic groups (Bradford et al., 2004; Buehler & Gerard, 2002), there is only a limited amount of research to consider. As a result, clinicians are somewhat more limited when addressing the impact of covert marital conflict and/or the impact of either conflict type on internalizing behaviors.

2.1. Latino families

In approaching the study of parent-adolescent relationship across EA and Latino ethnic groups, it is important to consider the value of two different theoretical perspectives: the ethnic equivalence and cultural values approaches (Lamborn & Felbab, 2003). Following an ethnic equivalence orientation, findings that link marital conflict with problematic adolescent behaviors in EA populations are expected to be similar to those noted in Latinos. On the other hand, a cultural value model theorizes differences between EA and Latino families in the aforementioned associations and invites a detailed group-specific examination. Furthermore, in cases where a cultural values orientation is supported (i.e., significant ethnic-group differences are noted), then it becomes essential to study/develop culturally specific prevention and intervention strategies to meet the needs of both EA and Latino families.

To date, the available research on this topic has primarily focused on European American (EA) populations in the United States with only a few studies examining Latino populations. This is an increasingly significant gap in the literature because Latinos make up the largest ethnic minority group in the U.S., accounting for 13% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002) and 16% of all children younger than 18 (Flores et al., 2002). In addition, given the evidence that Latino youth are at an increased risk to engage in problem behaviors (Kerr, Beck, Shattuck, Kattar, & Uriburu, 2003), it is important to identify the familial risk factors related to externalizing and internalizing behaviors in order to prevent and treat these issues.

Studies have found mixed results when comparing EA and Latino populations in terms of the effects of marital conflict on child behaviors. Parke et al. (2004) found that marital conflict was significantly associated with child outcomes for both Mexican Americans and European Americans, but found the relationship to be stronger for Mexican Americans. Similarly, when comparing Chilean and EA families, Cummings, Wilson, and Shamir (2003) found that marital conflict was associated with child outcomes for both groups, although the relationship was found to be stronger in the case of the Chilean sample. On the other hand, in a study of EA and Latino (primarily Cuban Americans) families, Lindahl, Malik, Kaczynski, and Simons (2004) found that marital conflict (verbally aggressive and coercive types) was more predictive of internalizing symptomatology among EA youth, even after controlling for income.

In contrast, other studies have found no significant ethnic differences. A retrospective study of the topic, Buehler and Gerard (2002) found similar associations between marital conflict and negative child

outcomes for both European Americans and Latinos. In their study of Hispanic American (primarily Cuban), EA, and biracial families, Lindahl and Malik (1999) found that marital conflict was associated with child externalizing behaviors, regardless of ethnic group. Bradford et al. (2004) conducted a large study of 9,050 adolescents from 11 different nationalities, including youth in Colombia and the United States, to examine cross-cultural differences between adolescents in the sample. Adolescents' reports of marital conflict were associated with poor behavioral outcomes, regardless of the national origin of the participants.

Overall, these studies indicate a significant relationship between marital conflict and youth outcomes for both European Americans and Latinos and, although ethnic differences are found in the strength of the marital conflict-adolescent outcome relationship. With some evidence for both theoretical approaches, further examination is clearly indicated in order to clarify whether a cultural value or ethnic equivalence model is supported by data comparing EA and Latino families. The present study provides an examination regarding the influence of marital conflict types on externalizing and internalizing behaviors for older Latino and EA youth living in the United States. It builds on the current literature by making explicit cross-cultural comparisons and examines the specialized effects of covert and overt marital conflict on externalizing and internalizing child behaviors.

2.2. Research hypotheses

Based on the existing research, the following hypotheses were tested in this study:

1. Both overt and covert marital conflict types will be significantly associated with youth outcomes in a similar manner regardless of ethnicity.
2. The association between overt marital conflict type and externalizing youth outcomes will be significantly greater than the relationship between covert marital conflict type and externalizing behaviors for both ethnic groups.
3. The association between covert marital conflict type and internalizing youth outcomes would be significantly greater than the relationship between overt marital conflict type and internalizing behaviors for both ethnic groups.

3. Method

3.1. Procedure

The data for this study were part of a larger project focusing on socialization dimensions and influences as they related to adolescent development and youth outcomes in various cultures. Data were collected from 2,292 ninth through twelfth graders in a west Texas-area school district. Based on teachers' willingness to allow surveying in their classrooms, 4,150 students were eligible for participation. Students for whom parental consent had been obtained completed written surveys in their respective English class. Some students were absent during survey dates at school and others were not able to participate due to non-returned consent forms, resulting in 2292 completed surveys (55.3% response rate). Seventy-eight surveys were discarded due to concerns regarding response integrity, with a resultant sample of 2214. In terms of ethnic group categorization, 788 students self-identified as being Latino or Hispanic with another 751 reporting as being European American (EA).

3.2. Sample

The Latino sample consisted of 420 girls and 368 boys, with an average age of 16.26. Nearly 51% of respondents came from an intact home, with both a mother and father living with them. Approximately

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