MECHANISMS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMOTIONAL ORGANIZATION

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In a series of elegant studies the authors of this Monograph test the hypothesis that children are negatively affected by parental marital conflict because they fear that the well-being of the family is threatened. By combining results from two methods, the analogue method and longitudinal, correlational designs, and across two countries, the authors provide compelling evidence for the role of emotional security in the link between marital conflict and children’s outcomes.

The emotional security theory holds a unique and influential position in the literature on marital conflict. Although other theories suggest that the experience of fear is important in understanding children’s outcomes, no other theory makes either of the striking claims that this is the central mechanism or that it is only information on security compiled into schemas that will be responsible for a range of emotional outcomes. This Monograph thus provides an original and impressive contribution, both theoretical and empirical, to our understanding of the negative effects of marital conflict on children.

The quest for theoretical specificity is admirable. The authors explicate three different theories in the literature on marital conflict, and evaluate the success of each in explaining the data. Through this process of comparison and evaluation they elucidate not only risks but the mechanisms involved in the links between adverse environments and children’s development. Specificity in the links between a family dyad and children’s representational functioning with respect to that dyad is demonstrated in this Monograph. In one of the studies reported, the functioning of the marital dyad was found to be associated with children’s security within the marital dyad but not with their security within the parent-child dyad. Similarly the functioning of the parent-child dyad was associated with children’s security within the parent-child dyad but not with security
within the marital relationship. This is a fascinating finding. It builds on the attachment literature to show the importance of security in development. It also suggests, however, that security is not an unassailable unitary construct but a set of component parts based on different kinds of relational experiences in the world. It will be interesting to see where this finding takes us in understanding diverse relational outcomes over the course of development. Attachment status in adults has been found to predict aspects of marital functioning such as mate choice (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), as well as the attachment relationship that develops between parent and child (Fonagy, Steele, & Steele, 1991). How will an understanding of security derived from the parental marital relationship contribute to patterns of adult behavior? What will the consequences be for the formation of intimate adult relationships if the individual has a representation based on his or her parents’ marital relationship that is characterized by instability and threat, while the representation from the parent-child relationship is characterized by trust and predictability? Family research is often plagued by negative processes in families clustering together to form a “blob” of an undifferentiated adverse environment. Such co-variation makes it difficult to identify underlying processes and mechanism. Davies et al. show that with targeted measurement within specific dyads it is possible to differentiate influences that are specific to dyads, and specific to children’s representations of relationships.

My aim in this commentary is to take forward the important debate on mechanism that has been raised by the authors by addressing three issues: basic processes in emotion, the operationalization of theory, and design issues.

Emotional Security Is a Theory About the Activation of the Fear System. How Does This Theory Relate to Present Theory and Research in the Area of Basic Emotions?

Attachment theory is a theory about the elicitation of fear, and the function that the infant’s display of fear plays in the activation of parental protection (Goldberg, Grusec, & Jenkins, 2000). In Davies et al.’s extension of attachment theory, called emotional security theory, marital conflict is a specific and fundamental threat to which children are exposed. The fear that is induced results in insecurity about the stability of the family. This experience of fear is hypothesized as the cornerstone for development of long-term affective structures seen in psychopathology. This is a bold, provocative, and thought-provoking theory, especially so in that it links what is still perhaps the most important idea of the emotional basis of child development—Bowlby’s attachment theory—with ideas that explain psychopathology, and that are potentially useful to clinicians.
Bowlby (1971) argued that the attachment system was selected for in evolutionary history for the protection of the young. This perspective of the role of emotion in interaction is also consonant with that of contemporary concepts of basic emotions, the theoretical perspective from which I work. The idea of this perspective is that emotional life is based on a few, genetically based, patterns of action and interaction (including happiness, fear, anger, and sadness; Oatley & Jenkins, 1996). These patterns have been evolutionarily selected, and can be thought of as species-typical outline patterns of interpretation and action. They are linked to more or less appropriate repertoires of response for recurring events of importance to humans (Oatley, 2000). As Frijda (1986) and Oatley and Johnson-Laird (1987) have argued, the function of an emotion is to set the brain into a specific mode of readiness for a particular kind of action.

The basic emotions perspective and emotional security theory would give the same account of internalizing disturbance. Fear is triggered by the appraisal of danger (family instability), and it functions to set the individual into a mode to avoid the danger. With repeated exposure, a cognitive/emotional structure is formed, characterized by a lower threshold for the perception of threat and the experience of fear. Although disorders involve more than emotions, there are good reasons to conceptualize short-term emotions on the same continuum as the emotions that are prevalent in psychopathology (Malatesta & Wilson, 1988; Oatley & Jenkins, 1996). Internalizing disorders are characterized by high levels of fear and sadness (Jenkins & Oatley, 2000; Keltner, Moffitt, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1995). Both perspectives give a similar account of how exposure to marital conflict might result in internalizing difficulties in children.

So, how do emotional security theory and the perspective derived from research on basic emotions diverge? The divergence is in how anger is elicited, and in the mechanism of association between marital conflict and children’s externalizing disorders. From research to date it would seem as if the basic emotion involved in externalizing disorder is anger (Jenkins & Oatley, 2000; Lemerise & Dodge, 1993). From a basic emotions perspective anger is experienced when goals are perceived as having been blocked intentionally (Averill, 1982; Ellsworth & Smith, 1988; Stein & Levine, 1989). The individual feels empowered and dominant, ready to beat the other in order to alleviate the goal block. If we remain true to the mechanism at the core of emotional security theory, then we have to explain how the experience of fear generates the expression of anger. This becomes important because marital conflict is more strongly and consistently associated with externalizing disorders than with internalizing disorders in children (Fincham, 1994).

Within the emotional security theory, and consistent with research to date on basic emotions, two points in the emotion process present them-
selves for links between fear and anger. First, fear may be the first link in a chain of emotional experience (Stein, Trabasso, & Liwag, 1993). Put in another way, fear is the cornerstone of subsequent affective experiences. In order to explain how threat results in disorders characterized by anger a series of steps in the appraisal/emotion process need to be hypothesized that lead to the experience of anger. For instance, children first feel threatened by marital conflict. This then leads them to feel the unavailability of their parents' support, a frightening matter indeed, as the authors of this Monograph postulate. This, in turn, leads them to feel that their own goals have been blocked, which leads them to feel anger. In such an account emotional security has an indirect effect on anger, through appraisals of goal blockage rather than directly through the appraisal of threat. The experience of blocked goals, however, would not have occurred if threat had not been experienced. It is interesting to note here that Bowlby's (1973) account of children's mourning for a lost parent did involve a sequential emotion process in which children experience loss and initially display sadness. When this does not result in the reappearance of the parent, sadness turns into anger. Do children feel blocked in their access to the parent?

A second process is also suggested by the emotional security model. It too is important and consistent with the functionalist account of basic emotions that I would espouse. It is that emotions serve the function of attaining goals (Campos, Mumme, Kermoian, & Campos, 1994; Jenkins & Greenbaum, 1999; Oatley, 2000). Emotional security theory postulates that once children have experienced the threat of conflict, their goal is to reattain security within the marital relationship. Emotional reactivity is both an indication of emotions elicited (as described above) and a means of reattaining emotional security. The idea here is that emotional distress functions to elicit care from others and that through this elicitation of care the goal of enhancing security is partially met. Davies et al. suggest that undifferentiated negative emotion serves this function and that children may become angry, sad, or fearful in their attempt to reinstate security. Angry emotions over the short and the long term (i.e., those within externalizing disorders) are part of this process. But I am left wondering again, why anger? Internalizing emotions such as sadness and fear function to elicit comfort and protection (Biglan, Rothlind, Hops, & Sherman, 1989; Hops et al., 1987). Anger is more likely to elicit aggression or avoidance (Jenkins & Ball, 2000). The important problem that Davies et al. have set us is whether the anger that we see in externalizing disorder is a consequence of a pattern of coping to reinstate security, or whether another mechanism, unrelated to the attachment or emotional security system, may explain this affective pattern.

Implicit in emotional security theory is the idea that security is the uppermost human goal. Although this may be true for the youngest infants, goals
of dominance or status (Oatley, 2000) and goals of affiliation (Goldberg et al., 2000; MacDonald, 1992) become powerfully organized early in child development. For instance, levels of anger (Goodenough, 1931) and aggression (Tremblay, 1999) are highest around age two years. Dominance hierarchies are evident among preschool children and displays of anger, aggression, and affiliation play their role in the negotiation of these hierarchies (Strayer, 1980; Strayer & Trudel, 1984). When children develop patterns of anger expression in response to marital conflict, emotional security theorists argue that the goal is the elicitation of protection and the reinstatement of security. This may be true. There is, as yet, only a small amount of data on the goals associated with anger expression and externalizing disorders, but these data suggest a link with the goals of dominance and retaliation (Currie, 2001; Jenkins & Greenbaum, 1999; Jenkins & Ball, 2000; Lochman, Wayland, & White, 1993) rather than those of security. It may be, therefore, that over the course of development there are individual differences in the goals that become prioritized. For some children goals of dominance may come to be more highly prioritized than goals of security. Externalizing disorders may reflect such a prioritization of goals (Currie, 2001). It is interesting to note that when separate models of the mediating mechanism of emotional security were tested for internalizing and externalizing disorders in Study 2 there were stronger links between emotional security and internalizing outcomes than externalizing outcomes. This suggests that the mechanism of emotional security may operate for the generation of internalizing disorders better than it does for externalizing disorders.

To my mind, because of the uniqueness and plausibility of this theory as well as the bedrock of empirical support on which both emotional security and attachment theory set, it is important to test the mechanisms unambiguously. One direction that future research might take is to differentiate more clearly between different negative emotions. Fear should be given the empirical primacy that it has already been accorded theoretically. In Study 1, for instance, for some tests of the theory all negative emotions were combined into one measure. Future tests of the theory might maintain fear as a separate emotion. It is important to develop theory about how and why the experience of fear transforms into the expression of anger. I think that it would be of value for investigators to consider whether different mechanisms might apply to the development of internalizing and externalizing disorders.

How May Theory Be Operationalized to Differentiate Between Mechanisms That Produce Behavioral Outcomes?

A major strength of this Monograph is that different theoretical positions are operationalized and compared. There are now multiple theories
of the way in which marital conflict affects children’s behavioral disturbance but little attention has been paid to how one theory is differentiated from another. When clear and specific predictions are made, which unambiguously differentiate one theory from another, and data are collected to test predictions of each theory, we will be able to move forward in our understanding of mechanism.

Study 1 represents such an advance. The predictions of social learning theory were compared with those of emotional security theory, both with respect to the stimuli that children will find distressing and the type of distress that children show. Several findings provided greater support for emotional security theory than for social learning theory. For instance children reported higher levels of distress to threats of family breakdown (as predicted by emotional security theory) than to high verbal hostility (social learning theory). As conflicts became more destructive children described greater activation in their efforts to stop the conflict or to avoid it (consistent with emotional security theory). They did not, however, become more angry or aggressive (as predicted by social learning theory). The evidence showed strong support for the idea that children are frightened for the well-being of the family and that they are motivated to re-instate security.

As theories are usually articulated at a global level, when operationalized within a specific context there may be argument about the extent to which the operationalization is an accurate test of the theory. The operationalization of social learning theory illustrated above seemed to me to provide an accurate test of that theory. Below I outline some points of divergence between the way the authors have operationalized the two theories and possible alternative operationalizations.

Study 4 also offers a comparison between emotional security theory and social learning theory. It is argued that social learning theory predicts a relationship between marital conflict and children’s aggression that is stronger in families that are more, as compared to less, cohesive. The basis of this is that children’s identification with parents is stronger when cohesion is greater, and that modeling is facilitated by stronger identification. An alternative prediction from social learning theory is that the combination of low cohesion and marital conflict will lead to the highest levels of child aggression. This could be argued on the basis that low cohesion is an index of increased family-wide conflict, which in combination with marital conflict, exposes the children to the highest levels of aggression. The latter account would make the same prediction as that made by the authors for emotional security theory.

In Study 2 a different theory—cognitive-contextual theory—is the object of comparison with emotional security theory. Both theories suggest that the appraisal and experience of fear play roles in children’s outcomes.
These theories appear to me to provide more convergent predictions than the authors suggest. Within the structural equation model presented in Study 1 appraisals of threat are “owned” by the cognitive-contextual theory. Is this a false partitioning of the two theories given the centrality of threat in emotional security theory? Self-blame is a prominent construct in cognitive contextual theory. In Study 1, child-related conflict themes, which seem to overlap with the concept of self-blame, are presented as an operationalization of emotional security theory. Is self-blame a good source of differentiation between the two theories?

My own view is that emotional security theory and cognitive contextual theory diverge on the range of appraisals relevant to the generation of affect. For emotional security theory, only appraisals about threat to the well-being of the family are relevant. For cognitive-contextual theory appraisals of threat are relevant, but so too are appraisals about marital conflict that lead to other emotions. Although in operationalizations of this theory both self-blame and threat have been prominent (Grych & Fincham, 1990, 1993), there is no reason, intrinsic to the mechanisms that are proposed, to give these appraisals primacy over other appraisals. Thus a child might see his father thwarting his mother’s goal and feel angry on her behalf. This anger-based sequence of appraisal and emotion could be seen as a mediator between marital conflict and children’s adjustment in cognitive-contextual theory (Grych & Cardoza-Fernandes, 2001). Because of the admirably bold assertion that only the threat of well-being to the family is relevant to emotional security, anger appraisals are not a candidate mechanism in that theory.

**Design Issues That Will Help Us to Identify Mechanism**

The use of experimental method, correlational design, and causal modeling is extremely impressive in this Monograph. Nested models are tested such that a high degree of specificity is achieved in whether particular paths are essential in understanding linkages across constructs. The measurement of constructs is exemplary. Multiple measures, derived from different informants, are used to construct latent variables. Members of this team have led the field in developing methodologies, measures, and models to explain the links between marital conflict and children’s disorders.

Probably one of the more challenging issues that now faces this field is the investigation of genetic effects, including gene-environment interactions. As yet we have no studies that have taken account of genetic effects while testing effects of marital conflict on children. Negative emotionality, including anger and fear, have substantial heritability (Cates, Houston, Vavak, & Crawford, 1993; Emde et al., 1992). The same is true for externalizing disorders (Miles & Carey, 1997) and internalizing dis-
orders (Topolski et al., 1997) of childhood. As the children taking part in the correlational studies described in this Monograph (Studies 2, 3, and 4), and those in all other correlational studies of marital conflict, live mainly with biologically related parents, associations between marital conflict and children’s disturbance are likely to occur, in part, because of genetic mediation and gene-environment correlation.

A second factor limiting our current ability to draw conclusions about causal mechanisms is our wide reliance on cross-sectional designs. As Fincham, Grych, and Osborne (1994) have pointed out, there are many questions to be answered in a research field before the expense of longitudinal models can be justified. Over recent years, and with the advent of this Monograph, many of these questions have been answered. Clarification of the causal role of some of these processes will occur when we test models of change. To my knowledge, there are only two published studies (one carried out by one of the authors of this Monograph) that test the hypothesis that marital conflict at Time 1 is associated with a change in children’s behavior at Time 2, having controlled for the children’s behavior at Time 1 (Harold & Conger, 1997; Hetherington, Henderson & Reiss, 1999). Study 2 in this Monograph does not show such clear evidence that marital conflict predicts change in child symptomatology. Although a relationship between marital conflict assessed at Time 1 and children’s security assessed at Time 2 was significant in the model, without controlling for emotional security at Time 1, conclusions about direction of influence remain ambiguous.

Experimental designs involving exposure to adult conflict were an inspired methodological innovation in the study of marital conflict by one of the authors of this monograph (Cummings, 1987; Cummings, Ianotti, & Zahn-Waxler, 1985). Negative effects have been shown for children exposed to live actors, and for children reporting emotional distress after seeing videotapes of conflictual interactions. However, because the outcomes assessed are not synonymous with disturbance, and the conflict exposure is not equivalent to being raised in a family in which high conflict occurs, such designs are only part of what is necessary to investigate causal mechanisms between parental conflict and children’s disturbance. Genetically sensitive designs need to be introduced into our correlational studies. Two types of design may be useful. First, adopted children in high- and low-conflict homes can be studied. Such a design has been used to investigate the effects of divorce on children (O’Connor, Caspi, DeFries, & Plomin, 2000). If the same relationships as those presented in this Monograph were shown when adoptive children were investigated, such effects could not be attributed to a shared genetic propensity toward the negative affect evident in both marital conflict and children’s disturbance. The second kind of design involves the inclusion of children within
the same family who show different degrees of genetic relatedness to one another. It is then possible to examine the effects of marital conflict, while taking account of the degree of heritability of the outcome under examination. Although traditional behavioral genetic analyses can only cope with a single pair of observations from the same family, multilevel modeling allows for the analysis of multiple children in a family and is thus ideal for population data in which full, half, and unrelated siblings may live together in the same family (Guo & Wang, 2002). In a multilevel model it is possible to take account of genetic effects while testing hypotheses of mediation and moderation, such as those considered in this Monograph.

The idea that difficult children predict an increase in marital problems is rarely tested in our field. Child effects on different aspects of parenting have been demonstrated (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000; Jenkins, Rasbash, & O’Connor, in press; O’Connor, 2002). We should therefore be alive to models of mutual influence, which allow that parental marriage has a negative impact on children and the role that difficult children have in increasing their parents’ conflict. It is, moreover, plausible that mutual influence is particularly important with respect to emotional security theory. It was evident from the latent construct of emotional security examined in Studies 2 and 3 that children who are uneasy about their parents’ marriage involve themselves in the marriage more. Having children intervene in the marital subsystem may make it more difficult for parents to resolve the conflicts between them as Minuchin (1981) suggested, resulting in increased parental conflict.

Conclusion

Emotional security theory, with its basis in attachment theory, provides a fascinating perspective on the mechanisms that might be involved between children’s exposure to parental conflict and their disturbance. One of the important tasks in the field is to differentiate both theoretically and empirically between mechanisms suggested by different theoretical perspectives. The authors of this Monograph have painstakingly dissected different theoretical perspectives and provided a compelling case for the influence of emotional security in children’s development.

References


