

Parental conflict and its association with sibling relationships

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ABSTRACT

The association between parental conflict and children's adjustment has long been of interest of both developmental and clinical psychologists. From a family systems perspective, the parental subsystem is very important for family functioning. Conflict in the subsystem has a negative influence on the functioning of other family subsystems such as the sibling subsystem. The aims of the present study are: (1) to investigate the correlation between sibling relationships and interparental conflict. (2) to compare perception of parental conflict of only children and the ones who have only one older sibling (3) to examine the gender differences in parental conflict and sibling relationships. Participants were selected by considering three inclusion criteria: (a) being 10 years old (b) being only child or having one older sibling and (c) having an intake family. Sample consisted of 106 students, attending public and private schools who met the inclusion criteria. "Sibling Relationship Questionnaire" and "Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale" were administrated respectively. ANOVA and Pearson Moment Correlation Coefficient Techniques were used to analyse the data. The results of the study indicated that, only children perceived more interparental conflict than children with an elder sibling.

Keywords: Sibling relationships, interparental conflict, only child

1. Introduction

Family unit is primarily responsible for nurturance, protection and support from birth to late adolescence; however, parent-child relationships are not the only source of support available within the family. Cicirelli (1982) pointed out that an estimated 80 to 90% of individuals grow up with a sibling. Siblings represent important agents of socialization (Kramer & Kowal, 2005; McElwain & Volling, 2005), support (e.g., Branje, van Lieshout, van Aken & Haselager, 2004; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Gass,

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Jenkins and Dunn 2007; Lempers & ClarkLempers, 1992; Scholte, van Lieshout, & van Aken, 2001) and stress throughout the life span (Cicirelli, 1996). On the other hand, one of the important resources of stress in children is parental conflict. Children who were exposed to parental conflict tend to show greater levels of stress and behavioral problems; when compared to non-exposed children, they are more sensitive to subsequent angry expressions by their parents (Cummings, 1987).

The association between parental conflict and children's adjustment has long been of interest of both developmental and clinical psychologists. From a family systems perspective (Minuchin, 1985), the parental subsystem is very important for family functioning. Conflict in the subsystem has a negative influence on the functioning of other family subsystems such as the sibling subsystem. Several studies demonstrated links between parental conflict and conflict in sibling relationships (Erel, Margolin, & John, 1998; Stocker, Ahmed, & Stall, 1997; Stocker & Youngblade, 1999). According to a literature review by Furman and Giberson (1995), marital conflict and sibling conflict within a family tend to be positively associated with each other, whereas sibling conflict tends to be negatively associated with endorsements of warm and caring dimensions in describing marriages. In the event of parental conflict, there is often a rise in negative interactions between siblings (Brody, Stoneman & McCoy, 1992; Hetherington 1988) but being part of a sibling relationship also appears to create some kind of buffering effect (Caya, Liem, 1998, Jenkins, 1992, Kempton, Armistead, Wierson, & Forehand, 1991).

Associations between parental conflict and sibling relationships can be explained from a number of different theoretical perspectives. According to Grych and Fincham's (1990) cognitive-contextual theory, parent-child and sibling relationships may be explained through children modeling their parents' conflict behavior; through parental conflict acting as a stressor on children, which in turn causes children to be hostile to their sibling; or through deterioration in the parent-child relationship because of the high levels of parental conflict.

According to Noller, Feeney, Peterson, and Sheehan (2013), parental conflict may affect children's relationships with each other. They support their proposition from studies by Cummings and his colleagues (1985)

who showed that children respond to the observation of adults' arguments with stress, particularly when the arguments are frequent. Noller and her colleagues also stated that deterioration in the parent-child relationship because of conflict can also be understood in terms of a spill-over effect involving the transfer of feelings from one setting to another or between various relationships within the family. In the same study were mentioned Pederson and his colleagues (1977) who showed that the more negative affect present in the marriage, the more negative affect is directed by the parent toward the child (Noller et. al., 2013).

Although there is a large international literature on the associations between parental conflict and sibling conflict, little is known about these associations in Turkey. Most of the researches in Turkey addressed sibling relationships in association with at least one sibling, who is handicapped or has behavioral disorder (Apalaçi, 1996, Berçin Yıldırım, 2005, Topaloğlu, 2011) and a few researches focused on the associations between sibling relationships and family dynamics (Kılıçaslan, 2001; Köse, 2003). The aims of the current study were: (1) to investigate the correlation between sibling relationships and interparental conflict. (2) to compare perception of parental conflict of only children and the ones who have only one older sibling and (3) to examine the gender differences in parental conflict and sibling relationships. This study is also one of the first attempts for investigating the relation between children's perceptions of marital conflict and their sibling relationships in Turkish Culture.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

Participants were selected by considering three inclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria were (a) being 10 years old (b) being only child or having one older sibling and (c) having an intake family. 550 students from 7 different elementary schools in Istanbul were screened for eligibility and 106 students, 54 female and 52 male, all of them 10-years-old, attending public and private schools met these inclusion criteria and constituted the sample of this study (Table 1).

Table 1: Sample description: numbers of participants by, gender, being only child, having an older brother or sister

Gender	Age	Only child	Having an older brother	Having an older sister	Total
Girls	10	21	18	15	54
Boys	10	16	13	23	52
Total		37	31	38	106

2.2. Measures

Sibling Relationships Questionnaire (SRQ). SRQ which was developed by Furman and Buhrmester (1985) was used to measure Children's perceptions of sibling relationships. The SRQ is a subjective self-report measure and consists of 48 items. The questionnaire has four scales and 16 subscales forming these factors:

1. Warmth/Closeness: consists of subscale scores of intimacy, prosocial behavior, companionship, similarity, admiration by sibling, admiration of sibling, and affection.
2. Relative Status/Power: consists of nurturance of sibling, dominance over sibling, minus the scale scores of nurturance by sibling and dominance over by sibling.
3. Conflict: consists of subscale scores of quarreling, antagonism and competition
4. Rivalry: consists of maternal and paternal partiality subscale scores.

Besides derivation of four scale scores, 16 qualitative features of sibling relationships can be assessed. In this study four scale scores have been assessed. The questionnaire is in five-point Likert-type format (1= hardly at all, 2= not too much, 3= somewhat, 4= very much, 5= extremely much). However, on the Maternal and Paternal Partiality scales, response choices range from "1= almost always him/her (favored)" to "5= almost always me (favored)" with a midpoint of "3= about the same". The SRQ was adapted into Turkish by Apalaçi (1996). Turkish form was administered to 30 third grade students for the reliability study. Cronbach alpha coefficients are between 0.12 and 0.90 for 16 subscales. In this present study, coefficients

related to Warmth/Closeness, Relative Status/Power, Conflict and Rivalry are found 0.85, 0.70, 0.82 and 0.75 respectively.

Children's perceptions of interparental conflict scale (CPICS). CPICS which was developed by Grych, Seid and Fincham (1992) was used to determine the childrens perception of parental conflict. This measure yields three scales: (a) Conflict Properties (Children's perceptions of the frequency, intensity and resolution of parental conflict) (b) Self-Blame (the extent to which children blamed themselves for or felt that they were the topic of parents' parental conflict), and (c) Threat (children's feelings of being threatened by parental parental conflict and their coping efficacy). Children responded to each item using a 3-point scale for which 1= true, 2= sort of true, 3= false. All scales have high internal consistency with coefficient alphas ranging from .78 to .90 and Grych et al. (1992) reported that the scales have high 2- week test-retest reliabilities ($r = .68$ for threat and $r = .76$ for self-blame, $r = .70$ for conflict properties). The scale consists of 35 items that evaluate parental conflict which is assumed to be related with child's adjustment and behavior problems. Besides three subscale scores, a total score can also be derived by using the scale. The Scale is adapted into Turkish by Öz (1999). The translation of CPICS into Turkish was done with a qualitative method, that is one-way translation. For the validity and reliability testing the scale was administered 232 children aged between 9 to 12 years. Factor analysis of the items resulted in three subscales like in the original study. The reliability of these subscales was assessed by two methods namely internal consistency and test-retest reliability. Results demonstrated that total scale had an alpha coefficient of .85. The alpha coefficients were .84 for Conflict Properties subscale, .78 for Threat subscale and .77 for Self-Blame subscale. Two-week test-retest correlations were obtained for a subsample ($n=49$) and coefficients were .88, .75 and .77 respectively.

2.3. Procedure

The researchers have first submitted their application for approval of Ministry of Education as requested by the local regulations and then started their screening in 7 randomly selected primary schools in Istanbul with students who fit the inclusion criteria. As a result, a total of 106 students

with only one older sibling completed SRQ and CPICS, while the only children completed CPICS.

2.4. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to study the whole data for extreme values and missing values. Cases with such anomalies were deleted from the analysis. Pearson's coefficient, ANOVA and t-test were also used to analyze the data. Analyses were done using SPSS 16.00 while an alpha level of .05 was used to determine statistical significance

3. Results

The overall correlation between perceived parental conflict and sibling relationship is found to be weak or moderate. Considering parental conflict and sibling relationships, significant correlations have been found between conflict properties and warmth/closeness ($r = -.31, p < .01$) as well as conflict properties and conflict ($r = .32, p < .01$). Furthermore, threat subscale and status/power scale ($r = -.24, p < .05$), self-blame subscale and conflict scale ($r = .25, p < .05$), total score of perception of interparental conflict and conflict scale ($r = .25, p < .05$) were found to be significantly correlated. The correlations among variables are presented at Table 2.

Table 2: Correlations between children's perceptions of interparental conflict and sibling relationship

N= 69	Conflict Properties	Threat	Self Blame	CPIC Total
Warm/Closeness	-.31**	-	-	-
Relative Status/Power	-	-.24*	-	-
Conflict	.32**	-	.25*	.25*
Rivalry	-	-	-	-

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

The applied one way ANOVA for parental conflict resulted in a significant effect of CPICS total score $F(2, 105) = 3.243, p < .05$. The

CPIC's total scores of children with one older sister ($M=50,47$, $SD= 6,86$) were less than the scores of only children ($M= 56,00$, $SD= 11,9$) (Table 3).

Another finding revealed that gender did not effect the perception of parental conflict. When sibling relationships are considered gender was found to effect rivalry scale $t(69)= 2,282$, $p< .05$. Girls ($M= 18,72$, $SD= 1,44$) perceived more intense rivary when compared to boys ($M= 17,80$, $SD= 1,86$) (Table 4).

Table 3: Differences in perception of interparental conflict for only children and children with an older brother and sister

CPIC Subscales	M			CPIC Total	F	df
	Only Child	Having an older brother	Having an older sister			
Conflict properties	24,49	22,74	21,45	22,89	2,535	2
Threat	19,16	17,26	17,53	18,02	1,649	2
Self Blame	12,35	11,74	11,50	11,87	,789	2
CPICS Total	56,00	51,74	50,47	52,77	3,243*	2

* $p<.05$

Table 4: Gender Differences in the sibling relationships for Rivalry

Gender	n	X	Sd	df	t
Girls	33	18,72	1,44	67	2,282*
Boys	36	17,80	1,86	67	

*p<.05

4. Discussion

Findings of this study are consistent with existing research concerning the associations between sibling relationships and parental conflict (eg., Sheehan, Darlington, Noller & Feeney, 2004; Stocker, Burwell, Briggs 2002; Stocker & Youngblade, 1999). Results revealed that the total CPICS scores of children with one older sister were less than the only children. There are also studies empirically demonstrating that the negative effects of stressful events on individual adjustment can be prevented, moderated or counteracted by a supportive relationship (Sandler, Miller, Short & Wolchick, 1989). As suggested by Eno (1985), siblings can provide for each other a safe and predictable world inside a family undergoing such instability and change. Kowal and Kramer (1997) stated that younger siblings are more likely to be objects of affection when compared to their older siblings, while older siblings perceive more parental control. Furthermore, researchers indicate that compared to their older siblings, younger siblings receive more parental affection, charged with fewer duties, and receive a more tolerant and democratic control from their parents (Brody, Stoneman & McCoy, 1992; Harris & Howard, 1983). According to this point of view parents might be trying to keep their younger child, whom they regard as an object of affection, out of their negative interaction settings. Another assumption supporting this result is, girls are expected to gain traditional gender roles in Turkish society, such as showing dependency, obedience and devotion. Especially in families from rural regions, girls are expected to act as a mother figure by providing nurturance and care for her younger siblings. Mother role given to girls may serve as a buffer to protect their younger siblings from their parents' parental conflict and to support them. However, this status also forces the older sister to bear the burdens of

her responsibilities. Although this situation may be advantageous for the younger siblings, the perception of the older sister should be investigated in further studies regarding the comments of both siblings. This study reveals that having an older sister or a brother may serve as a buffer protecting the child against parental conflict. However, as stated above such a situation should also be investigated considering older sibling.

Another result of the study revealed that, gender did not effect the perception of parental conflict. Early studies found the strongest relations between parental conflict and children's adjustment problems for boys (Block, Block & Morrison, 1981; Emery & O'Leary, 1984; Jouriles, Murpy, Farris, Smith, Richters, & Waters, 1991; Porter & O'Leary, 1980) whereas another research concluded that both boys and girls were equally affected from parental conflict. Studies in Turkey considering gender revealed that (Öz, 1999) boys have higher self-blame scores than girls. However, Profeta's (2002) study pointed out that child's perception of parental conflict was not differentiated when the subjects' gender is taken into account.

When sibling relationships are considered, girls perceived more intense rivalry compared to boys. Findings are inconsistent regarding the relations between the gender of siblings and quality of their relationships. Some researchers reported more aggressive behaviors (e.g., Minnet, Vandell & Santrock, 1983), while others found greater companionship and closeness among same-sex siblings (e.g., Kier & Lewis, 1998). On the other hand, many other researchers indicated that there is little or no relationship between the gender of siblings and young children's sibling relationship quality (Martin & Ross, 2005; Stauffacher & DeHart, 2006). Some researchers further suggested that the gender of siblings has a trivial effect on sibling relationship quality after the preschool period (Abramovitch et al., 1986; Martin & Ross, 2005).

There is evidence that gender is an organizing feature of family roles and responsibilities in the culture (e.g., Azmitia & Brown, 2002; Updegraff, McHale, Whiteman, Thayer & Delgado, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999) and may have implications for the differential socialization of sons and daughters. Valenzuela (1999) found that girls provided more assistance to families and assumed greater responsibilities than did boys. Besides, Kağıtçıbaşı

(1982), in her nation-wide study in Turkey on the Value of Children revealed that parents preferred sons more than daughters as a child. According to Navaro (1993) in Turkish family context girls are expected to be dependent, passive and obedient than boys. Hetherington (1988) found that parental favoritism toward one child have negative effects on sibling interactions; disparities in parents affection, warmth and involvement toward one of the siblings causes the child to behave more competitive, hostile and avoidant to his sibling. Since girls are less preferred and less appreciated than boys because of their gender in Turkish Culture, they may perceive the rivalry more.

Some similarities have been noticed between the present and, Stocker and Youngblade's (1999) study. However, there are some differences through several aspects; First of all, in this study part of the sample group was consisted of only children and perception of parental conflict of only children has been compared to children, who have an older sibling. Second, Stocker and Youngblade (1999) have used a version of SRQ that involved 22 items and 3 scales (conflict, warmth, rivalry) while in the present study the 48-item questionnaire form yielding four scales (warmth/closeness, Relative status/power, Conflict, Rivalry) has been administered. Third, Stocker and Youngblade (1999) used only two sub-scales -Self blame and Threat- of Children's Perceptions' of Interparental Conflict Scale (*CPICS*) (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992) in order to assess children's perception of interparental conflict. Self blame and Threat measure children's cognitive and emotional responses and interpretations of parental conflict. The Conflict properties scale, in contrast, assesses children's perceptions of the frequency and characteristics of parents' conflict and has less to do with children's feelings about the conflict. However, in the recent study beside self-blame and threat scales, Conflict properties scale and total score were also assessed. Researchers investigating the effects of parental conflict on children found that, several dimensions of conflict are important for children's adjustment. These are frequency (Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1981; Long, Slater, Forehand & Fauber, 1988; Porter & O'Leary, 1980), intensity (Cummings, Pellegrini, Notarius & Cummings, 1989; Holden & Ritchie, 1991) content (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Jouriles, Bourg & Farris, 1991) and resolution (Cummings et al., 1989; Shifflett-Simpson & Cummings, 1996). These dimensions constitute the majority

of the content of the Conflict properties scale of the CPICS. Such a study may help to determine which consequences are more closely related with parental conflict.

This study has some methodological limitations worth mentioning for further elaborations. These limitations attenuate the clarity and generalization of the current results. First limitation is about the inclusion criteria used for sampling (students being 10 years old, being only child or having one older sibling and having an intake family) which has severely limited the total number of respondents. Thus, corroboration of these findings produced by longitudinal data would lend credibility to the findings. Second, because all data were obtained through students' self-reports, our findings would be augmented and clarified by obtaining further data from multiple informants. Third limitation is about the measurement tool: there is no data available for the structural validity of SRQ scale and further study should analyse this structural validity on various age groups. We would also recommend to evaluate the perception of parental conflict between sibling pairs comparing younger brother/sister to older brother/sister. A similar comparison may be done between same sex siblings and different sex siblings.

5. References

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