'If You Can't Say Something Nice, Don't Say Anything at All': Coping with Interpersonal Tensions in the Parent-child Relationship during Adulthood

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Abstract

Tensions are normative in the parent-child tie, but there is less information on the strategies used to cope with such tensions. This study examined strategies parents and adult children use in reaction to interpersonal tensions and the implications of those strategies for relationship quality. Parents and their adult sons and daughters (aged 22 to 49; *N* = 158 families, 474 individuals) reported the strategies they used in response to tensions with one another (constructive, destructive, and avoidant). Across dyads, parents and adult children reported using constructive strategies more often than destructive or avoidant strategies. Strategy use varied between and within dyads by generation, gender of parent, ethnicity, education, and age of child. Constructive strategies predicted better relationship quality, whereas avoidant and destructive strategies predicted poorer relationship quality. Parents may be more likely to use constructive strategies, which are meant to maintain the relationship due to their greater investment in the tie.

Keywords

conflict strategies; parent- child; relationship quality; ambivalence

Interpersonal tensions in the parent-child tie predict poor relationship quality and adjustment problems across the lifespan (Birditt, Miller, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, in press; Steinberg, 2001). Broadly defined, interpersonal tensions are irritations experienced in social relationships. The strategies used in response to tensions have implications for relationship quality in childhood and adolescence (Belsky, Jaffee, Hsieh, & Silva, 2001; Caughlin & Malis, 2004; Robin & Weiss, 1980). For example, destructive strategies (e.g., put downs, commands) predict lower quality relationships (Robin & Weiss, 1980). Parent-child tensions research has often focused on mothers and daughters (Fingerman, 1998) and we know little about tension strategies used among fathers and sons in adulthood. Tension strategies may vary within and

between dyads and have implications for intergenerational relationship quality. Identifying determinants of poor parent-child relationships is essential because poor quality ties are associated with detrimental psychological and physical consequences for grown children and parents (Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008; Umberson, 1992).

The purpose of this study was to assess: 1) the types of interpersonal tension strategies most commonly used in the parent-child tie during adulthood, 2) whether the strategies vary by parent or child characteristics (e.g., gender, age, generation, ethnicity), and 3) implications of different strategies for intergenerational relationship quality.

Theoretical framework

Similar to coping strategies, interpersonal tension strategies include efforts to directly alter the situation or control emotional responses when experiencing an interpersonal problem (i.e., irritation with a social partner; Lazarus, 1999). Interpersonal tension strategies are often categorized as destructive, constructive, or avoidant (Birditt, Fingerman, & Almeida, 2005; Blanchard-Fields, Stein, & Watson, 2004). Destructive strategies include direct negative behaviors such as yelling and name-calling. In contrast, constructive strategies are direct strategies meant to alter the situation in a positive way and include tactics such as working with one another to find a solution, or trying to understand one another (Canary & Cupach, 1988). Avoidant strategies circumvent the problem, such as not discussing certain topics, not speaking for a period of time, or doing nothing at all (Birditt & Fingerman, 2005; Blanchard-Fields et al., 2004). For this study, we examined avoidant strategies meant to maintain relationships (e.g., not discussing certain topics) rather than more negative avoidant strategies such as stonewalling or ending the relationship (Rusbult, Verrette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991; Rusbult, Zebrodt, & Gunn, 1982). Although negative avoidant strategies are important, people report these strategies less often than other strategies (Birditt et al., 2005) and negative avoidance may be rare among parents and children who maintain frequent contact (Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

The investment model and the stress process model are useful frameworks for understanding tension strategies and relationship quality in the parent-child relationship. The investment model suggests social partners who are more invested in a relationship use strategies aimed at maintaining that relationship (Rusbult et al., 1991). For example, a person who is more invested may choose to calmly discuss the problem or avoid certain topics of conversation, rather than yell or argue. Although this theory was developed to understand romantic ties, it is also useful for understanding parent-child tensions (Fingerman, 1998).

The stress process model suggests that coping strategies are influenced by the socio-cultural context (Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981). Men and women, as well as people from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, are differentially exposed to stressors (e.g., financial strain, daily hassles), which may lead to use of different interpersonal coping strategies (Pearlin, Schieman, Fazio, & Meersman, 2005). Men and women also may experience different socio-cultural expectations for how to deal with interpersonal tensions and what strategies are appropriate to use. Indeed, Pearlin suggests that coping is not due to individual dispositions, but rather, to the specific context (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

Socio-structural and cultural factors

Socio-structural and cultural factors associated with variability in strategy use in the parent-child relationship may include generation, age, gender, ethnicity, and education. Parents may be more likely than their offspring to use strategies meant to maintain the relationship because parents are more emotionally invested in the tie (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971; Giarrusso, Feng, & Bengtson, 2005)). Parents often perceive their children as extensions of themselves and gain

feelings of self worth from the relationship (Ryff, Lee, Essex, & Schmutte, 1994). In contrast, offspring may attempt to enhance differences between themselves and their parents as a means of achieving independence. Fingerman (1998) examined differences between mothers and daughters in tension strategies and found destructive strategies did not vary by generation, but daughters were more open about discussing problems than were mothers, who preferred more avoidant strategies.

Interpersonal tension strategies may also vary by age of adult children (Fingerman, 1996). The frequency of parent-child tensions declines from early to late adolescence (Birditt, Jackey, & Antonucci, 2009; Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998). In adulthood, older children also report less strain with parents than younger children (Umberson, 1992). People become better able to regulate emotional reactions as they age, using more avoidant and less destructive strategies (Birditt et al., 2005). Thus, as children become more independent and have less contact with parents, parents and children may use different strategies in reaction to tensions.

Tension strategies also may vary by gender. Mothers' relationships with daughters tend to be intense, involving closeness and negativity (Fingerman, 2001; Smetana, Daddis & Chuang, 2003). Mothers also tend to express more intimacy and negativity with young children and adolescents than do fathers (Collins & Russell, 1991; Russell & Russell, 1987).

Ethnicity may be associated with interpersonal tension strategies (Umberson, 1992). Due to structural (economic) and cultural variations, African Americans are highly reliant on family support (Neighbors, 1997) and may be more reliant on the parent-child tie for support than European Americans (Umberson, 1992). When asked who they would turn to when experiencing problems, African Americans are most likely to turn to family (Neighbors, 1997). This support may be a source of strain in these ties (Chatters, Taylor, Neighbors, 1989; Umberson, 1992). Indeed, African Americans are more emotionally expressive and less likely to inhibit emotion than European Americans (Consedine, Magai, Cohen, & Gillespie, 2002; Vrana & Rollock, 2002). Thus, African Americans may be more likely to actively respond to problems either constructively or destructively rather than using avoidance

Tension strategies also may vary by education. Individuals with less education tend to have fewer resources and to be reliant on family for support (Umberson, 1992). Thus, less education may predict greater reactivity to problems in the parent-child tie.

Relationship quality

Interpersonal tension strategies may have implications for relationship quality. We considered two dimensions of relationship quality: affective solidarity and ambivalence. Affective solidarity refers to positive sentiments between family members, including emotional closeness, trust, and respect (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein, 2002). In contrast, intergenerational ambivalence includes conflicting feelings that arise when social structures do not provide clear norms for interpersonal behaviors or relationships (Connidis & McMullin, 2002). Such ambivalence is defined as experiencing positive and negative sentiments about the same relationship (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998). Here, we examined interpersonal tension strategies and viewing the relationship as simultaneously positive and negative.

Interpersonal tension strategies may be associated with feelings of solidarity and ambivalence. Few studies have examined associations between tension strategies and parent-child relationship quality in adulthood. Theory and research suggest that destructive strategies are associated with lower relationship quality, whereas constructive and some avoidant strategies are associated with better relationship quality (Rusbult et al., 1991). Parents and their adolescent children who use more destructive strategies (demand/withdrawal, put downs) and

fewer constructive strategies have more distressed relationships (Caughlin & Malis, 2004; Robin & Weiss, 1980). Fingerman (1998) found few associations between tension strategies and affective solidarity among mothers and daughters in adulthood. However, adult children report greater ambivalence with parents who were rejecting and hostile earlier in life (Willson, Shuey, & Elder, 2003). Further, Hagestad's (1987) research indicates that families often avoid discussing conflict laden topics as a way of maintaining stronger relationships.

Other factors associated with tension strategies and relationship quality

This study controlled for other factors that may account for variations in strategies: self-rated health, socially desirable responding, neuroticism, and tension intensity. People with poor health often experience a decrease in support and cause discomfort among their social partners (Bloom & Spiegel, 1984). Participants who wish to appear more socially acceptable are less likely to report undesirable behaviors (e.g., destructive strategies). Parents and children who score higher in neuroticism report greater ambivalence and may use different types of tension strategies (Fingerman, Chen, Hay, Cichy, & Lefkowitz, 2006). Finally, we controlled for the extent to which parents and children experienced tension in the relationship (i.e., tension intensity; Caughlin & Malis, 2004). Parents and children who experience greater tension intensity may be more likely to use destructive strategies.

Present study

The present study seeks to contribute to the literature by including reports of interpersonal tension strategies from mothers, fathers, and their adult sons and daughters. In addition, this study examines whether the strategies are differentially associated with relationship quality. This study had three main goals:

1. Assess types of interpersonal tension strategies most commonly used in the parent-child relationship in adulthood. We predicted that parents and children would report more constructive and avoidant strategies than destructive strategies (Fingerman, 1998).

2. Examine whether the types of strategies vary by generation, age of offspring, gender, ethnicity, and education. We predicted parents would use constructive and avoidant strategies more often and destructive strategies less often than their offspring (Fingerman, 1998). We hypothesized that families with older offspring would report using avoidant and constructive strategies more often, and destructive strategies less often, than families with younger offspring (Birditt et al., 2005). Because of the greater negativity reported in mother-daughter ties, we predicted that women (mothers, daughters) would report using more destructive strategies than men (fathers, sons; Collins & Russell, 1991). Due to differences in strain and expressiveness, we predicted that African Americans would report using destructive and constructive strategies more often and avoidant strategies less often than European Americans (Umberson, 1992). Because of greater strain and demands for support, we predicted that people with lower education would report more destructive strategies and less constructive and avoidant strategies than those with higher education (Umberson, 1992).

3. Assess whether interpersonal tension strategies are associated with relationship quality. We hypothesized that parents and children who reported more destructive strategies and less constructive and avoidant strategies would report lower solidarity and greater ambivalence.

Method

Participants

Participants were from the Adult Family Study (Fingerman, Lefkowitz, & Hay, 2004), including 158 family triads (mother, father and adult child) living in the greater Philadelphia metropolitan area. Participants completed individual telephone and videotaped interviews, as well as paper and pencil assessments of interpersonal tension strategies and relationship quality. Table 1 includes the sample description.

Participant selection involved a stratified sampling method by age (22 to 33, 34 to 49), gender, and ethnicity of adult children. We screened households for people ages 22 to 49. When we reached a household that only had adults over age 50, we asked if they had grown children in the age range eligible for the study. If so, we selected the grown child with the next closest birthday. Thus, the likelihood of getting younger or older siblings was randomized.

Telephone recruitment of the majority of the sample occurred from lists purchased from Genesys Corporation and random digit dialing within regional area codes (85%) and the remaining (15%) were obtained using convenience sampling (e.g., snowball, advertisements, and church bulletins). Snowball sampling involved obtaining referrals from randomly selected participants; no snowball participants were obtained from participants recruited via convenience or snowball methods. We used each sampling procedure in equal distributions across the stratification groups of gender, age, and ethnicity.

Mothers and fathers separately completed measures regarding tension strategies and the quality of relationship with the target child, and the target child reported on each of their parents. The triads consisted of adult children (ages 22 to 49; 48% men) and their mothers and fathers (ages 40 to 84) who lived within 50 miles of one another. Parents and adult children who co-resided were excluded from the study. A total of 32% of the participants were African American and the remaining 68% were European American. A total of 64% of adult children were married and 87% of the parents were married (to each other). Most parents had more than one child (94%), $M = 3.52$ children per family ($SD = 1.90$; 1 to 12).

Measures

Interpersonal tension strategies—A 12-item measure assessed how often parents and their children used the three types of tension strategies. Items were developed using previous literature (Fingerman, 1998). The instructions were as follows: The next questions ask how you deal with problems that come up with your (son, daughter, mother, or father). Please indicate how often you do each of these things when a problem comes up by circling the correct number: 1 (*never*), 2 (*rarely*), 3 (*sometimes*), 4 (*often*), and 5 (*always*).

Confirmatory factor analyses were conducted in AMOS to determine the validity of the measure. An initial three factor confirmatory analysis revealed one item did not load well (.14). A subsequent confirmatory factor analysis of an 11-item measure revealed that the three factor model had a good fit (*CFI* =.931, *RMSEA* = .056; See Table 2 for items). The chi-square was significant, but this is most likely due to the large sample size ($\chi^2(df = 41) = 123.52, p < .01$).

We created three subscales representing avoidant (5 items, $\alpha = .49$ to .81), constructive (4 items, $\alpha = .53$ to .71) and destructive strategies (2 items; $\alpha = .62$ to .71). The range of alphas reflects the lowest and highest alpha across the four reports (e.g., offspring about mother, father about offspring). Although these alphas are somewhat low, they are similar to previous studies of parent-child relationship quality (Umberson, 1992).

Affective solidarity—We assessed positive feelings about the relationship with the 5-item Bengtson Affective Solidarity index (Bengtson & Schrader, 1982). Participants indicated how much they trust, understand, respect, feel affection toward, and feel their child/mother/father is fair from 1 (*not well*) to 5 (*extremely well;* α = .82 to .86).

Ambivalence—As in prior studies of intergenerational ambivalence (Fingerman et al., 2008; Willson, Shuey, & Elder, 2003), our measure of ambivalence combined ratings of positive and negative aspects of the relationship (Umberson, 1992). The positive measure included two items (how much does he/she make you feel loved and cared for, how much does he/she understand you, α = .66 to .75). The negative measure included two items (how much does he/she criticize you, how much does he/she make demands on you, α = .33 to .75) rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). We used Griffin's similarity and intensity of components formula to calculate ambivalence [(positive + negative)/2-|positive negative|] + 1.5 (Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995). Higher scores reflect greater ambivalence.

Generation, gender, and age—Generation and gender of parent included four categories: 1 (*child reporting on father*), 2 (*child reporting on mother*), 3 (*mother reporting on child*), and 4 (*father reporting on child*). We categorized families by gender of the child as 0 (*daughter*) or 1 (*son*). Age of the child was included as a continuous variable.

Ethnicity and education—We coded ethnicity as 0 (*European American*) and 1 (*African American*). Education consisted of the number of completed years of schooling (range = 7 to 18).

Covariates—Participants rated their health from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). Participants also completed the 10-item impression management scale of the *Balanced Inventory of Socially Desirable Responding* (Paulhus, 1991) to examine the extent to which participants presented a positive image of themselves rather than responding truthfully. Participants indicated agreement from 1 (*not true*) to 7 (*very true*) with items such as: "I sometimes tell lies if I have to" and "I have never taken things that don't belong to me" (α = .59 to .67).

Participants completed the 12-item revised *Eysenck Personality Questionnaire* neuroticism scale. Participants reported yes or no regarding items such as "Are you often fed up?" or "Are your feelings easily hurt?" (α= .73 to .74). To assess the intensity of tensions, participants reported whether they had experienced tensions in the relationship regarding a series of 14 topics in the past 12 months (e.g., health, finances, housekeeping) from 1 (*not at all)* to 5 (*a great deal*). We calculated a mean across all topics (α = .89 to .90).

Analysis strategy

Because the data were nested, including multiple family members and children reporting on both parents, we used multilevel modeling (SAS PROC MIXED). The models included a random family effect (implying a correlation of observations within family) and a random parent/child within-family effect that allowed for correlations between reports of mothers and fathers on the same child and the child's reports on both parents. The models included two levels; upper-level variables included characteristics of the family triad (e.g., ethnicity), and lower level variables included parent or child characteristics (e.g., tension strategy).

Results

The analyses included three steps. First, we conducted descriptive analyses. Next, we estimated models to assess whether tension strategies varied by generation, gender of parent, gender of

child, age of child, ethnicity, and education. Finally, we estimated models to examine associations between tension strategies, affective solidarity, and ambivalence.

Descriptives

All parents and children reported using at least one constructive strategy, 98.3% reported using at least one avoidant strategy, and 82.3% reported using at least one destructive strategy; 81.6% of the sample used all three types of strategies.

Participants reported using constructive strategies ($M = 3.89$, $SD = .59$) most often, followed by avoidant ($M = 2.44$, $SD = .69$) and destructive strategies ($M = 2.11$, $SD = .82$). A repeated-measures ANOVA revealed significant differences among the three means (F (1, 629) =31,832.55, $p < .01$). Table 3 includes the means and standard deviations. We calculated correlations between tension strategies to establish the distinctiveness of the constructs. Constructive strategies were negatively correlated with destructive strategies ($r = -.23$, $p < .01$) and avoidant strategies ($r = -.31$, $p < .01$); avoidant and destructive strategies were positively correlated ($r = .35$, $p < .05$). Correlations were similar across the four types of responses: mother about offspring, father about offspring, offspring about mother, and offspring about father (see Table 3). These moderate correlations indicate tension strategy types are associated but distinct.

Tension strategies by generation, age, gender, ethnicity, and education

To assess whether tension strategies varied by socio-structural and cultural factors, we estimated three multilevel models with each tension strategy type as the outcome. Gender, generation, age of child, ethnicity, and education were predictors; self-rated health, social desirability, neuroticism, and tension intensity were covariates (Table 4). Avoidant strategies varied by generation, gender of parent, ethnicity, and education. Children reported using avoidant strategies ($M = 2.51$, $SE = .05$) more often than their fathers ($M = 2.32$, $SE = .05$), and mothers reported using avoidant strategies more often ($M = 2.45$, $SE = .05$) than fathers ($M = 2.32$, $SE = .05$). European American families reported using avoidant strategies more often than African American families. Respondents with more education reported using avoidant strategies more often than those with less education.

Constructive strategies varied by generation, but not by gender, age of child, ethnicity or education. As predicted, mothers and fathers reported using constructive strategies more often ($M = 4.05$, $SE = .05$; $M = 3.99$, $SE = .05$, respectively) than their children ($M = 3.80$, $SE = .05$; $M = 3.73$, $SE = .05$, respectively). Destructive strategies varied by age of child, but not by gender, generation, ethnicity, or education. Families with younger children reported using destructive strategies more often than families with older children. To examine whether generational differences in strategy use varied between families with sons or daughters, we conducted additional analyses, including the interaction between the child gender and the generation/parent gender variables. There were no significant interactions.

Associations between tension strategies and relationship quality

We examined the associations between interpersonal tension strategies, affective solidarity, and ambivalence with two multilevel models. The three tension strategies (destructive, constructive, avoidant) were entered together as predictors. Covariates included generation, age of child, gender, ethnicity, education, self-rated health, social desirability, neuroticism, and tension intensity. With regard to affective solidarity, participants who reported using constructive strategies more often reported greater affective solidarity ($B = 1.94$, $SE = .20$, $F = 90.20$, $p < 01$) whereas participants who reported using avoidant strategies more often reported lower affective solidarity ($B = -1.74$, $SE = .18$, $F = 90.49$, $p < .01$). Surprisingly, there was no association between the use of destructive strategies and affective solidarity. The

covariate education was associated with greater affective solidarity ($B = .11$, $SE = .05$, $p < .05$)

With regard to ambivalence, participants who reported using constructive strategies more often reported having less ambivalent relationships ($B = -0.34$, $SE = .07$, $F = 23.34$, $p < .01$) whereas participants who reporting using destructive and avoidant strategies more often reported having more ambivalent relationships ($B = 0.35$, $SE = .05$, $F = 47.32$, $p < .01$; $B = 0.39$, $SE = .06$, $F = 37.94$, $p < .01$, respectively). As for the covariates, individuals with higher education ($B = .04$, $SE = .02$, $p < .05$), African Americans ($B = .18$, $SE = .09$, $p < .05$, and those who reported more intense tensions ($B = .27$, $SE = .06$, $p < 01$) reported greater ambivalence. Offspring also reported lower ambivalence regarding fathers than did fathers ($F = 4.84$, $p < .01$).

Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to examine mother, father, and grown children's reports of strategies used in response to tensions in their relationships. Previous research established that tensions are common in the parent-child tie (Clarke et al., 1988; Birditt et al., in press), but predominantly examined tension strategies in the mother-daughter relationship (Fingerman, 1998). This study indicates that generational differences found in previous work do not necessarily apply in dyads that include fathers and sons. Further, constructive strategies predicted greater relationship quality, whereas destructive and avoidant strategies predicted lower relationship quality. Thus, the adage 'if you can't say something nice don't say anything at all' may not be good advice. Parents and children may benefit from directly confronting problems rather than from avoiding them. Parents and children with good relationships may be more motivated to use constructive strategies than those with poorer quality relationships. Findings from this study partially support investment theory and the stress process model.

Generational differences and similarities

The first optimistic finding to note is that mothers, fathers, and their adult children reported using constructive strategies more than destructive or avoidant strategies. There are, however, within-dyad differences in use of strategies. Intriguingly, parents reported using more constructive strategies than did their adult children, but there were no parallel generational differences in less use of destructive strategies. According to investment theory, parents should use strategies beneficial to the relationship rather than strategies that are harmful (Rusbult, et al., 1991). Thus, the findings only partially support investment theory. Parents may be better able to separate their feelings of love from negativity, and to use constructive strategies in response to feelings of irritation than their children (Bengtson et al., 2002). Indeed, although parents report greater tension with their children than do their children (Birditt et al., in press, they respond to these tensions constructively. It is possible that parents and children reported similar levels of destructive strategies because these strategies are more likely to be reciprocated (Comstock & Buller, 1991). For instance, when one dyad member yells, his or her social partner is more likely to respond in kind, leading to similar reports of strategy use.

The inclusion of fathers in this study also revealed new findings regarding avoidance. Fathers reported using avoidant strategies less often than their offspring, whereas there were no generational differences among mothers and offspring. This is dissimilar to previous work indicating that mothers use more avoidance than daughters (Fingerman, 1998). Offspring may use more avoidance with their fathers because their relationships tend to be less close and they have less frequent contact with their fathers than their mothers (Umberson, 1992; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Avoiding upsetting topics may be easier in relationships with less contact. Fathers (and mothers) report greater tension about individual issues (e.g., finances, education) and fathers may be more likely to communicate disappointment regarding these issues (Birditt et al., in press).

Gender

Gender is a major factor influencing parent-child relationships in childhood and adolescence (Collins & Russell, 1987). Inconsistent with previous work and the stress process model, the present study revealed few gender differences. Interpersonal tension strategies did not vary by the child's gender. There were also few differences between mothers and fathers. Mothers were more likely to use avoidant strategies than fathers, but mothers and fathers were equally likely to use constructive and destructive strategies. Similarly, research has found no differences between sons and daughters in parental ambivalence; suggesting gender differences noted in prior cohorts may be dampened in recent cohorts (Fingerman et al., 2006; Logan & Spitze, 1996). Gender intensification theory suggests children experience an intensification of gender roles during adolescence, which coincides with greater sex typed parental socialization (Hill & Lynch, 1983). Tensions in adulthood may be more gender neutral (as compared to adolescence) and may elicit fewer gender differences in how parents view the relationship.

Ethnicity and education

As predicted, and consistent with the stress process model, African American families were less likely to use avoidant strategies than European American families. This finding may be due to cultural differences or norms regarding the expression of emotion. Compared to European Americans, African Americans tend to express more affect (Vrana & Rollock, 2002). This finding may also be due to the greater reliance on family ties among African Americans (Chatters & Taylor, 1990; Umberson, 1992). People with less education were also less likely to report avoiding problems perhaps because they also are more reliant on family for support due to more limited resources (Umberson, 1992). Avoiding problems may be more difficult to accomplish in relationships with a great deal of contact and support exchange.

Relationship quality

Consistent with investment theory, interpersonal tension strategies were differentially associated with relationship quality. Parents and adult children who reported greater use of constructive strategies also reported greater affective solidarity and less ambivalence. Similarly, research indicates that constructive strategies are associated with greater relationship maintenance and higher quality (Rusbult et al., 1991).

In contrast with constructive strategies, avoidant strategies predicted lower solidarity and greater ambivalence. This finding was surprising because we had expected that avoidance would be associated with greater solidarity and lower ambivalence. According to Hagestad's (1987) research regarding demilitarized zones, families avoid discussing certain topics as a way of maintaining relationships. Hagestad's research focused on stressful family situations that may not apply to families in the current study. Thus, in typical situations, avoidant strategies may not be instrumental for greater solidarity and lower ambivalence. According to investment theory, avoidant strategies in this study are meant to preserve, rather than to destroy ties (Rusbult, Zebrodt, & Gunn, 1982). Our findings suggest that avoidance may not be beneficial for relationships. Likewise, distressed parents and children may be more likely to use avoidant strategies. Elsewhere, topic avoidance also is associated with lower closeness and relationship satisfaction in the parent-child relationship (Daily & Palomares, 2004).

We found inconsistent results regarding the association between destructive strategies and relationship quality. As hypothesized, destructive strategies were associated with greater ambivalence. However, destructive strategies did not predict lower affective solidarity. Positive and negative aspects of relationships have domain specific associations with positive and negative relationship quality. In particular, negative aspects of relationships are associated with negative affect, whereas positive aspects of relationships are associated with positive affect (Ingersoll-Dayton, Morgan, & Antonucci, 1997). Indeed, people with more ambivalent

relationships may express those feelings destructively, whereas a lack of positive feelings may indicate feelings of indifference rather than strong negative emotions that require expression.

Future directions

Limitations to this study should be considered in future research. Because this study included parents' responses regarding one child, it is not clear whether findings apply to all children within a family. Indeed, parents make differentiations between their children in levels of support and satisfaction (Suitor & Pillemer, 2007). Future research should examine whether parents use similar tension strategies with all of their children, and the factors that predict variation in tension strategies. Work should also examine the use of more negative avoidant strategies among adults and their parents as these strategies may be particularly harmful for relationship quality. In addition, the association between tension strategies and relationship quality is most likely bidirectional and an important next step is to examine associations over time. Future research also should assess whether associations between tension strategies and relationship quality vary by contextual and personal factors. Indeed, some types of conflict strategies may be beneficial or harmful depending on the specific individual or context within which the tension occurs. This study relied on self-report data, and although we controlled for socially desirable responding, future work should replicate these findings.

Our findings also have interesting implications for practice. Clinicians should be aware of individual and contextual differences in the types of tension strategies that parents and their children use. Parents and children should be encouraged to use constructive strategies as opposed to avoidant or destructive strategies when encountering problems in their relationships.

Overall, this study makes several important contributions to the literature. When parents and adult children experience tensions, they use constructive strategies more often than others, and constructive strategies are associated with better relationship quality. Strategies also varied within and between dyads with parents using more constructive, and fathers using less avoidance, than offspring. African American families and people with less education were less likely to use avoidance than were European Americans and people with more education. Notably, avoidance is not associated with better relationship quality, but rather, is associated with lower solidarity and greater ambivalence. Parents and children with fewer resources may find more adaptive ways of dealing with tensions over time. The strategies parents and children use to cope with problems in their relationships may be important to consider when examining the links between negative relationship quality, ambivalence, and well-being. Although investment theory and the stress process model were useful for explaining the findings, we may need to develop a more comprehensive theory to explain variations in tensions, tension strategies, and how they may be linked to relationship quality and well-being.

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Table 1

Characteristics of the Sample

	Adult Children (*n* = 158)	Fathers (*n* = 158)	Mothers (*n* = 158)
Means and Standard Deviations			
Age	34.97 (7.28)	63.00 (9.27)	61.26 (8.79)
Years of education	15.05 (1.97)	14.13 (2.80)	14.03 (2.66)
Self-reported physical health[a]	3.75 (0.85)	3.34 (0.94)	3.27 (1.01)
Neuroticism	3.75 (2.66)	2.70 (2.34)	2.23 (2.28)
Proportions			
Women	0.52	0.00	1.00
Ethnicity			
African American	0.32	0.32	0.32
European American	0.68	0.68	0.68
Marital Status			
Married/Remarried	0.64	0.90	0.89
Widow	0.00	0.00	0.01
Divorced/separated	0.09	0.07	0.07
Single	0.21	0.00	0.01
Cohabitating	0.06	0.03	0.03

[a]Rated 1 = *poor*, 2 = *fair*, 3 = *good*, 4 = *very good*, 5 = *excellent*.

Table 2

Interpersonal Tension Strategy Subscales and Confirmatory Factor Analysis Loadings

	Avoidance	Constructive	Destructive
Avoidance			
To avoid problems, I don't tell my child when I'm upset	.54		
I try to avoid discussing topics I know we disagree about	.63		
I talk with someone else about the problem	.49		
I tell him/her what I think he/she wants to hear	.50		
I try to avoid talking with him/her for a while when I'm annoyed or irritated	.66		
Constructive			
I try to accommodate my child's wishes when a problem comes up		.42	
I work with my child to try to find solutions to a problem that we might have		.70	
I try to understand his/her point of view		.71	
I try to accept things with my child as they are		.40	
Destructive			
I yell or raise my voice to my child			.72
I argue with him/her about situation when I disagree with him/her			.69

Table 3

Average Use of Tension Strategies and Correlations between Dyad Members by Dyad

Tension Strategy	Sons about		Daughters about		Fathers about		Mothers about	
	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters
Avoidance								
Mean	2.49	2.40	2.54	2.60	2.29	2.32	2.40	2.47
Standard deviation	(0.81)	(0.74)	(0.73)	(0.75)	(0.62)	(0.62)	(0.59)	(0.55)
Dyad correlations[*]	.30	.45	.20	.28	.30	.20	.45	.28
Constructive								
Mean	3.67	3.78	3.80	3.83	3.96	4.00	4.03	4.08
Standard deviation	(0.61)	(0.57)	(0.56)	(0.58)	(0.62)	(0.53)	(0.57)	(0.59)
Dyad correlations	.46	.09	.42	.35	.46	.42	.09	.35
Destructive (M, SD)								
Mean	1.89	2.01	2.24	2.34	2.07	2.07	2.09	2.16
Standard deviation	(0.74)	(0.89)	(0.83)	(0.95)	(0.82)	(0.72)	(0.78)	(0.75)
Dyad correlations	.36	.54	.34	.49	.36	.34	.54	.49

[*] Dyad correlations refer to correlations between dyad member responses (e.g., correlations between father and son)

Table 4

Tension Strategies as a Function of Socio-structural Factors

	Avoidance			Constructive			Destructive		
	B	SE$_B$	F	B	SE$_B$	F	B	SE$_B$	F
Generation/gender of parent			2.94*			10.25**			.65
Planned contrasts									
Father vs. adult child			7.29**			18.72**			0.01
Mother vs. adult child			0.01			16.59**			0.00
Mother vs. father			5.10*			1.07			1.02
Child re: Mother vs. Father			0.70			1.96			0.93
Gender of adult child (son)	−0.02	0.06	0.12	−0.10	0.06	2.49	−0.16	0.09	3.32
Age of adult child	0.01	0.01	2.83	0.01	0.01	3.29	−0.01	0.01	4.79*
Ethnicity (African American)	−0.21	0.07	9.13**	−0.04	0.07	0.36	−0.13	0.09	1.91
Education	0.05	0.01	14.83**	−0.01	0.01	0.68	0.01	0.01	0.58
Self-rated health	−0.05	0.03	2.80	0.05	0.03	3.65	−0.09	0.04	6.29*
Socially desirable responding	−0.02	0.01	3.67	0.03	0.01	10.69**	−0.05	0.01	13.56**
Neuroticism	0.02	0.01	4.08*	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.34
Tension intensity	0.35	0.04	72.39**	−0.20	0.04	31.71**	0.29	0.05	34.48**
Between family var.	0.05	0.02	2.44*	0.07	0.02	4.02**	0.15	0.04	4.00**
Parent/child var. within family	0.06	0.03	2.49*	0.03	0.02	1.75	0.08	0.03	2.38*
Residual var.	0.26	0.02	12.09**	0.20	0.02	12.12**	0.35	0.03	12.11**

Note. Tests for covariance parameters are Z tests.

*
$p < .05$.

**
$p < .01$