

Conflict Engagement and Conflict Disengagement During Interactions Between Adults and Their Parents

Kelly E. Cichy,¹ Eva S. Lefkowitz,² and Karen L. Fingerman³

¹Department of Human Development & Family Studies, Kent State University, Ohio.

²Department of Human Development & Family Studies, Pennsylvania State University, University Park.

³Department of Human Development & Family Sciences, University of Texas at Austin.

Objectives. This study examined generational, ethnic, and gender differences in conflict behaviors during interactions between adults and their parents. We considered associations between observed conflict engagement and conflict disengagement behaviors and participant-rated relationship quality.

Method. Participants included 155 African American and European American women and men (aged 22–49 years), their mothers and their fathers ($N = 465$). Adult children were videotaped separately with their mother and their father discussing relationship problems. Independent raters coded the conversations for conflict engagement (e.g., pressuring for change) and disengagement (e.g., withdrawing) behaviors.

Results. In African American families, parents displayed more conflict engagement and adult children displayed more conflict disengagement, whereas European American parents and adult children did not differ in their conflict behaviors. Mothers, fathers, and adult children reported poorer relationship quality when they engaged in more conflict engagement behaviors. Adult children also reported poorer quality relationships when their mothers displayed more conflict engagement behaviors. Mothers reported poorer quality relationships when their adult children engaged in more conflict disengagement.

Discussion. Findings suggest that even as adults, parents and children in poorer quality relationships may engage in potentially ineffective behaviors to resolve conflicts.

Key Words: Conflict—Ethnicity—Observations—Parent–adult child relationships.

THE parent–child tie has been described as one of the most significant family relationships (Fingerman, Hay, & Birditt, 2004), and the majority of adults and their parents remain invested in the other party throughout life (Fingerman & Birditt, 2011; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Still, even as adults, parents and children continue to experience conflicts, where one partner is frustrated or dissatisfied with the behavior of the other partner (Birditt, Miller, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2009; Clarke, Preston, Raksin, & Bengston, 1999).

The behaviors adults and their parents engage in when they are upset have implications for those conflicts. Birditt, Rott, and Fingerman (2009) found that adults and their parents reported using constructive (e.g., trying to find a solution) more often than they used destructive (e.g., yelling) or avoidant (e.g., avoid topics of disagreement) conflict strategies. Studies of adolescents, however, suggest that parents and adolescents engage in other strategies, including demanding by pressuring for change or blocking requests for change by withdrawing (Caughtlin & Malis, 2004; Caughlin & Ramey, 2005). Indeed, withdrawal by physically disengaging from the discussion is associated with poorer parent–adolescent relationship quality (Branje, 2008; Caughlin & Golish, 2002), suggesting that withdrawal is an undesirable strategy for managing conflict.

Even in adulthood, the parent–child tie is not solely positive (Fingerman & Birditt, 2011), and the issues of intimacy and autonomy that characterize early parent–child relationships may persist into adulthood. Thus, adults and their parents may engage in the conflict (e.g., nagging) or attempt to disengage from the conflict (e.g., physically withdrawing) in ways that are distinct from the destructive or avoidant strategies previously studied (Birditt et al., 2009; Lefkowitz & Fingerman, 2003). Further, how adults and their parents negotiate conflicts is likely to have implications for the quality of intergenerational relationships. Parent–adult child relationships are characterized by both positive and negative feelings (Pitzer, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2011; Priester & Petty, 2001), emphasizing the importance of distinguishing between positive and negative aspects of the relationship.

The current study examines (a) generational, ethnic, and gender differences in observed conflict engagement and conflict disengagement behaviors and (b) associations between observed behaviors and parents' and adult children's ratings of positive and negative relationship qualities. In this paper, "conflict engagement" encompasses behaviors labeled "demand" in prior studies (e.g., blaming, pressuring for change) and refers to active attempts to influence the other person. By contrast, conflict disengagement encompasses

behaviors labeled “withdrawal” in prior studies and refers to passive attempts to stall or avoid pursuing the discussion (Berns, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1999; Branje, 2008; Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Christensen & Heavey, 1990).

To our knowledge, this study is the first to observe behaviors among fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters from different ethnic groups (African Americans and European Americans). The few studies involving observed behaviors of adults and parents have focused solely on European American mothers and daughters (Fingerman, 2001; Martini & Busseri, 2010). A vast research literature has benefited from observed conversations involving adolescents and their parents (e.g., Campione-Barr & Smetana, 2004; Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994), providing information about the dynamics of these relationships. Likewise, observed conversations may provide important information regarding adult children and their parents because such measures assess behaviors parents and adult children may be unaware of or reluctant to endorse in questionnaire measures.

Generational, Ethnic, and Gender Differences in Observed Conflict Behaviors

Generational status.—Prior work in adolescence suggests that parents display more conflict engagement behaviors (e.g., nagging, blaming), whereas adolescents disengage more from conflict than parents (Caughlin & Malis, 2004; Caughlin & Ramey, 2005). In adolescence, disengagement reflects the adolescent’s desire to be free of parental control (Kahlbaugh & Haviland, 1994). In adulthood, the more egalitarian parent–child relationship involves fewer concerns over parental control (Noack & Buhl, 2004). Still, even as adults, conflicts may involve one partner’s desire for the other person to change (Birditt et al., 2009). Studies of intergenerational ties suggest parents are more invested in the parent–child relationship than their adult children (Fingerman & Birditt, 2011; Shapiro, 2004). These investment differences may be associated with partners’ engagement in or disengagement from conflicts. The principle of least interest stemming from studies of romantic ties (Waller, 1938), suggests that the less emotionally involved partner tends to disengage from conflict discussions (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000; Eldridge & Christensen, 2002). Conflict engagement behaviors that promote the discussion may come from a desire to alter the status quo and attempt to change someone’s behavior, whereas conflict disengagement may reflect a desire to maintain the status quo and block requests for change. Given differential relationship investment between generations, the principle of least interest may apply to interactions between adults and their parents. Therefore, we hypothesize that parents will display more conflict engagement and fewer conflict disengagement behaviors than grown children (Hypothesis 1).

Ethnicity.—Research in childhood and adolescence reveals ethnic differences in parent–child conflict, suggesting that different family norms may govern behaviors in African American and European American families (Barber, 1994; Parke & Buriel, 2006). African American parents emphasize authority and respect for parents (Dixon, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008), which may inhibit African American adult children from engaging in conflict behaviors, even when they desire changes in their parents. African American adult children may respond to their parents’ requests for change in subtle ways, such as disengagement, whereas African American parents may still attempt to assert their authority during interactions with their grown children.

In comparison, European American parents place less emphasis on parental authority and are more tolerant of parent–child conflict (Barber, 1994). Thus, European American adult children may be as likely as their parents to display conflict engagement behaviors when upset. We anticipate that ethnicity will moderate generational differences in conflict behaviors, with greater generational differences in conflict engagement and disengagement in African American than European American families (Hypothesis 2).

Gender.—Gendered experiences also may contribute to mothers and daughters behaving differently than fathers and sons during conflict interactions. Women are socialized to seek affiliation and confront relationship conflict, whereas men are socialized to seek relationship autonomy and avoid conflict (Belle, 1991; Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000). Research on communication patterns in marriage suggests that women more commonly demand (e.g., pressure for change), whereas men withdraw (e.g., physically disengage; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Kluwer, Heesink, & Van-de-Vliert, 2000).

It is less clear, however, whether gendered patterns of communication observed during marital interactions also characterize interactions between parents and adult children. Prior research has documented gender differences in mothers’ and fathers’ reports of their own conflict behaviors with adult children (Birditt et al., 2009; Collins & Russell, 1991; Lye, 1996). Adolescents are more willing to engage in disagreements with their mothers than with their fathers (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp, & Dukewich, 2002). In adulthood, mothers and adult daughters tend to use constructive approaches to negotiate tensions (Fingerman, 2001), whereas less is known about how fathers and adult children resolve conflicts.

Previous research also reveals differences in conflict behaviors between daughters and sons. Compared with adolescent sons, adolescent daughters tend to engage in rather than avoid conflict with parents (Cummings et al., 2002; Kahlbaugh & Haviland, 1994). Therefore, we anticipate that adult daughters will display more conflict engagement than sons and that mothers will display more conflict engagement and less disengagement than fathers (Hypothesis 3).

Observed Conflict Behaviors and Relationship Quality

Finally, conflict engagement (in the form of demand behaviors) and disengagement (in the form of withdrawal) have been associated with relationship dissatisfaction between adolescents and their parents (Branje, 2008; Caughlin & Golish, 2002). It is unclear, however, whether conflict engagement and disengagement behaviors hold similar implications for the quality of the parent–adult child tie. Adult daughters circumvent problems by actively avoiding discussing conflicts to protect their mothers' feelings (Fingerman, 2001), suggesting that disengaging from the conversation could characterize families with better quality relationships. Yet, prior research suggests that physically looking away or ignoring requests for change may be interpreted more negatively than choosing to avoid a topic (Branje, 2008; Caughlin & Golish, 2002).

Further, according to the Actor–Partner Interdependence Model (APIM), individuals' ratings of relationship quality are associated not only with their own observed behaviors but also with how their conversational partner behaves (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). For example, Caughlin and Golish (2002) found that parents whose adolescents used more conflict avoidance reported poorer relationship quality. Based on this prior work, we expect parents and adult children who more frequently use both conflict engagement and disengagement behaviors (i.e., actor's behaviors) to report poorer quality relationships compared with parents and adult children who less frequently use these behaviors (Hypothesis 4). We also anticipate that parents' and adult children's relationship quality ratings will be associated with their conversational partner's conflict engagement and disengagement behaviors (i.e., partner's behaviors). For example, parents whose offspring disengage more may rate their relationships less favorably because offspring's disengagement blocks parents' requests for change and is incompatible with parents' attempts at resolution (Caughlin & Golish, 2002). Members of both generations may perceive the relationship more negatively when their conversational partner displays more conflict engagement because these behaviors have deleterious implications for relationship quality (Caughlin & Malis, 2004; Heavey et al., 1993).

METHODS

Participants

The sample was part of The Adult Family Study (see: Fingerman, Chen, Hay, Cichy, & Lefkowitz, 2006). Participants included an adult daughter or son aged 22–49, their mother, and father. Families were recruited from the greater Philadelphia Metropolitan Statistical area. Potential participants were identified via purchased telephone lists as well as snowball (8%) and convenience sampling (e.g., posted notices, 7%) to increase minority representation.

Adult children had to live within 50 miles of both parents. Biological parents made up the majority of parents in the study (97% of mothers, 91% of fathers), although offspring also identified stepparents (1% of mothers, 7% of fathers) or adoptive parents (2% of mothers and fathers). The study received IRB approval.

The larger sample completed telephone interviews ($N = 213$ families), with a subsample of 158 families ($N = 474$) completing videotaped interviews in participants' homes. Individuals who completed both the telephone and videotaped interviews did not significantly differ on most demographic characteristics from those who only completed the telephone interview with the exception that offspring who completed the videotaped interviews were slightly older ($M = 35.0$, $SD = 7.3$) than offspring who only completed the telephone interview ($M = 32.3$, $SD = 6.3$).

Participants for these analyses included 155 families ($N = 465$); three families were excluded due to poor sound and/or visual quality in the videotapes.

The sample included African American ($n = 49$) and European American ($n = 106$) families. Stratified sampling assured inclusion of comparable numbers of daughters ($n = 80$) and sons ($n = 75$) distributed by age (daughters $M = 35.3$, $SD = 7.5$, sons $M = 35.0$, $SD = 7.0$) and ethnicity. Parents ranged in age from 45 to 83 years (fathers $M = 62.6$, $SD = 8.6$, mothers $M = 60.8$, $SD = 8.0$). European Americans reported more years of education ($F(1, 445) = 12.07$, $p < .001$; $M = 14.9$, $SD = 0.12$) than did African Americans ($M = 13.0$, $SD = 0.16$) and were more likely to be married ($\chi^2 = 63.86$, $p < .001$). We controlled for education and marital status. Nonbiological parents ($n = 18$) were excluded because analyses revealed significant differences in behaviors between biological and nonbiological parents.

Procedure

Videotaped conversation.—Adult offspring participated in two face-to-face videotaped interviews separately with their mother and father. When possible, the order of the interviews (mother first, father first) was randomized. Participants were videotaped discussing three topics: (a) what they enjoy about each other, (b) worries about each other, and (c) what annoys them about each other. All participants first discussed what they enjoyed; the order of the worry and annoyance conversations was counterbalanced. Whenever possible, conversations took place behind closed doors, separate from the interviewer. For participating in both videotaped interviews, offspring received \$50 and each parent received \$20. In addition, either the parent or the offspring received an additional \$10 for traveling to the other's home. Consistent with prior observational studies of conflict behaviors in the parent–adolescent and marital literatures (Berns et al., 1999; Caughlin & Ramey, 2005), we examine conflict behaviors during the “annoyance” conversation. Interviewers

Table 1. Description of Observed Behavior Codes and Reliability Estimates

Behavior	Description	Average intraclass correlations
Conflict engagement		
Pressures for change	Requesting, demanding, or nagging for some kind of change in behavior or in the relationship	0.79
Blaming	Blaming, accusing, or using sarcasm or insults	0.65
Critical	Criticizing the other person, having a problem with some aspect of the other person	0.77
Judgmental	Making an evaluation of the other person as being wrong or what the other is saying is dumb	0.71
Conflict disengagement		
Withdraws	Becoming silent, looking away, and physically disengaging from the conversation	0.70

gave the following instructions and then left the participants alone in the room:

People we love and value can also be annoying at times—nobody is perfect. Parents and grown children experience different types of problems, even if they do not discuss those problems. For the next 8 minutes, I'd like you to talk about what bothers you about each other, and what you both do about it.

Measures

Observational ratings.—As in prior observational studies (Caughlin & Ramey, 2005; Christensen & Heavey, 1990), coders considered the entire duration of the conversation, rating each behavior globally on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). Raters coded the parent and offspring separately during different coding sessions. We selected behaviors to represent conflict engagement and conflict disengagement using codes from previous measures of conflict behaviors (Berns et al., 1999; Branje, 2008; Gottman, McCoy, Coan, & Collier, 1996). See Table 1 for descriptions of behavior codes and reliability for each code.

Videotaped coding procedures.—Independent undergraduate raters coded these videotapes during two different coding sessions. Most were European American. Four raters coded videotaped conversations between adults and their parents for behaviors indicative of conflict engagement (e.g., blaming) and disengagement (e.g., withdraws). A different set of 11 independent raters coded two behaviors included in this study indicative of conflict engagement, being critical and judgmental, during a different coding session where raters coded a larger set of variables (Lefkowitz, Cichy, Hay, Espinosa-Hernandez, & Fingerman, 2011).

Raters trained together for 1 hr twice weekly for 15 weeks to learn the coding system, discuss discrepant cases, review tapes, and obtain adequate interrater reliabilities. Once the coders achieved satisfactory intraclass correlations (ICCs) above .70, then the raters independently coded each interaction (McCoy, Cummings, & Davis, 2009). All raters coded a weekly criterion tape and received feedback throughout the coding process. We used a conservative coding method, with a minimum of two raters coding each observation. Therefore, interrater reliability is based on the entire sample and is reported as the mean ICC across all possible rater

pairs. The values for the behaviors represent the mean rating across all raters who coded the videotape (ranging from 2 to 11).

Observed behaviors.—Prior to testing specific hypotheses, we created a behavior subscale for conflict engagement (4 items: pressures for change, blaming, critical, judgmental, $\alpha = 0.81$). Conflict disengagement refers to the observed withdrawal behaviors.

Participant-Rated Variables

Relationship quality.—Relationship quality was assessed during telephone interviews that preceded the videotaped interviews. We assessed positive (e.g., acted warm, 6 items) and negative (e.g., behaved insensitively, 8 items) qualities of the relationship (Pitzer et al., 2011). Respondents indicated how often in the past 12 months their mother/father/offspring had behaved in these ways from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*; $\alpha = .84$ for positive and $\alpha = .82$ for negative subscale). Offspring completed the measure separately for their mother and their father.

Covariates.—Respondents also reported their age (continuous, mean-centered), years of education completed (continuous, mean-centered), and marital status (1 = married, 0 = separated/divorced/widowed/never married).

Analysis Strategy

Analyses involved a multilevel modeling framework to account for the nonindependence of data, with parents and offspring from the same family (Singer & Willett, 2003). We included behaviors nested within dyads (parent and offspring) and dyads nested within families. To examine generational, gender, and ethnic differences in observed behaviors, we estimated general linear mixed models using the PROC MIXED procedure in the statistical package, SAS (Littell, Milliken, Stroup, & Wolfinger, 1996).

In these models, we treated family and ethnicity as upper level units. We treated generation, parent gender, and offspring gender as lower level units. Models included fixed effects and a random intercept. We specified an unstructured error covariance matrix, which does not require that family members' behaviors be associated in any specific

Table 2. Mixed Models for Observed Behaviors as a Function of Generation, Gender, and Ethnicity (*n* = 137 families)

Predictors	Conflict engagement		Conflict disengagement	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Intercept	1.64***	0.08	2.15***	0.12
Parent gender	-0.16**	0.05	0.17**	0.07
Generation	0.24*	0.10	-0.78***	0.16
Offspring gender	-0.08	0.05	0.15*	0.07
Ethnicity	0.14	0.07	-0.61***	0.11
Generation × Ethnicity	-0.21**	0.09	0.57***	0.14
Covariates				
Age	-0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Education	0.01	0.01	-0.04**	0.01
Marital status	-0.03	0.05	0.01	0.08

Notes. Parent gender: 0 = mother, 1 = father; Generation: 0 = parent, 1 = offspring; Offspring gender: 0 = daughter, 1 = son; Ethnicity 0 = European American, 1 = African American. Models exclude nonbiological parents.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

way (Littell et al., 1996). We included the random intercept because values of the dependent variables (i.e., conflict behaviors) were expected to vary across different families. We included age, years of education, and marital status as covariates.

First, we estimated two multilevel mixed models to test hypotheses with conflict engagement and disengagement behaviors as the outcomes (Table 2). Each model included the following fixed effects: generation (parents vs. offspring), parent gender (father vs. mother), offspring gender (daughter vs. son), and ethnicity (African American vs. European American). We also considered the Generation × Ethnicity interaction.

Next, we used the PROC MIXED procedure in SAS to estimate APIMs to consider family members' own observed behaviors (actor) and their conversational partners' behaviors (partner) in the same equation predicting each party's perceptions of relationship qualities (Kenny et al., 2006; Snijders & Bosker, 1999). Because adult children reported separately on relationship qualities with each parent, multilevel multivariate models were estimated separately for fathers and offspring and for mothers and offspring. In these models, we simultaneously estimated regressions with parent's relationship qualities ratings as one dependent variable and offspring's relationship qualities as the second dependent variable while controlling for the correlation between parent's and offspring's ratings of relationship qualities (Snijders & Bosker, 1999). Again, we specified an unstructured error covariance matrix. Each party's participant-rated positive and negative relationship qualities were the dependent variables (estimated in separate models). The independent variables included parents' and offspring's observed conflict engagement and disengagement behaviors as self (actor: his or her own behaviors) and other (partner: conversational partner's behaviors). We included parent's and offspring's age, ethnicity, years of education, and marital

Table 3. Participant-Rated Relationship Qualities as Predicted by Fathers' and Offspring's Observed Behaviors (*n* = 141 dyads, models exclude nonbiological fathers)

	Father model		Offspring model	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Positive relationship qualities				
Actor engagement	-0.21	0.63	-1.56*	0.75
Actor disengagement	-0.78	0.45	-0.01	0.41
Partner engagement	-0.55	0.61	0.48	0.77
Partner disengagement	-0.59	0.32	-0.45	0.55
Covariates				
Intercept	24.34***	3.09	32.07***	3.79
Education	0.01	0.11	-0.12	0.19
Age	0.08**	0.03	-0.08	0.05
Ethnicity	0.24	0.76	-2.98***	0.92
Marital status	-1.25	1.03	1.16	0.81
Offspring gender	-0.15	0.61	-1.02	0.74
Negative relationship qualities				
Actor engagement	2.16***	0.66	2.25**	0.74
Actor disengagement	-0.25	0.47	0.43	0.40
Partner engagement	1.29*	0.64	0.44	0.75
Partner disengagement	0.56	0.34	-0.41	0.54
Covariates				
Intercept	6.39*	3.24	4.76	3.72
Education	0.04	0.11	0.18	0.19
Age	-0.04	0.03	0.05	0.05
Ethnicity	0.96	0.79	0.55	0.90
Marital status	2.70**	1.09	-1.22	0.80
Offspring gender	-0.07	0.64	0.00	0.73

Notes. Actor behaviors refer to fathers' and offspring's own behaviors, whereas partner behaviors refer to the behavior of the conversational partner.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

status as well as offspring gender as covariates in the models (Tables 3 and 4).

RESULTS

Hypotheses 1 & 2: Generational and Ethnic Differences in Observed Conflict Behaviors

We expected parents to engage in more conflict engagement and less conflict disengagement behaviors than adult children (main effects of generation, Hypothesis 1). We predicted greater generational differences in African American than in European American families (interaction of Generation × Ethnicity, Hypothesis 2) for both behaviors. We followed up a significant omnibus test for the interaction with pairwise comparisons to determine where the differences lie. Table 2 provides the unstandardized regression coefficients, whereas the estimates in the text are the results of contrasts.

Findings for conflict engagement behaviors indicated a main effect of generation that was qualified by a Generation × Ethnicity interaction (Table 2). In support of Hypothesis 2, follow-up tests (estimate = 0.24, *SE* = 0.10, *p* < .05) revealed that African American parents displayed more conflict engagement behaviors (estimate = 1.73, *SE* = 0.07) than their offspring did (estimate = 1.50, *SE* = 0.07), whereas European Americans parents (estimate = 1.66,

Table 4. Participant-Rated Relationship Qualities as Predicted by Mothers' and Offspring's Observed Behaviors ($n = 151$ dyads; models exclude nonbiological mothers)

	Mother model		Offspring model	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Positive relationship qualities				
Actor engagement	-1.19*	0.59	-1.06	0.58
Actor disengagement	-0.20	0.49	-0.14	0.33
Partner engagement	-0.86	0.57	-0.35	0.59
Partner disengagement	-0.67*	0.32	-0.32	0.49
Covariates				
Intercept	32.49***	2.90	35.89***	3.17
Education	-0.17	0.11	-0.14	0.15
Age	0.03	0.03	-0.13***	0.04
Ethnicity	-0.63	0.62	-0.30	0.69
Marital status	-1.09	0.94	0.71	0.64
Offspring gender	-0.49	0.58	-1.05	0.58
Negative relationship qualities				
Actor engagement	3.02***	0.67	2.08**	0.68
Actor disengagement	0.72	0.55	-0.03	0.41
Partner engagement	1.83**	0.69	1.63*	0.72
Partner disengagement	0.16	0.43	0.50	0.53
Covariates				
Intercept	7.11*	3.46	5.45	3.44
Education	0.20	0.11	-0.07	0.15
Age	-0.03	0.04	0.08*	0.04
Ethnicity	0.38	0.70	0.54	0.75
Marital status	0.27	1.04	-0.15	0.67
Offspring gender	-1.32*	0.67	-0.75	0.63

Notes. Actor behaviors refer to mothers' and offspring's own behaviors, whereas partner behaviors refer to the behavior of the conversational partner.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

$SE = 0.06$) and offspring (estimate = 1.63, $SE = 0.06$) did not significantly differ in their conflict engagement behaviors ($p > .05$).

For conflict disengagement behaviors, there were main effects of generation and ethnicity, qualified by a Generation \times Ethnicity interaction. In support of Hypothesis 2, follow-up tests (estimate = -0.78, $SE = 0.16$, $p < .001$) revealed that African American offspring engaged in more conflict disengagement (estimate = 2.31, $SE = 0.10$) than their parents did (estimate = 1.53, $SE = 0.10$), whereas European American offspring (estimate = 1.70, $SE = 0.08$) and parents (estimate = 1.48, $SE = 0.08$) did not significantly differ in their conflict disengagement ($p > .05$).

Hypothesis 3: Parent and Offspring Gender Differences in Observed Conflict Behaviors

We also expected daughters to display more conflict engagement behaviors than sons and for mothers to display more conflict engagement and fewer conflict disengagement behaviors than fathers (main effects of parent and offspring gender; Hypothesis 3). Results for conflict engagement behaviors indicated a significant main effect of parent gender (i.e., differences between father-offspring dyads vs. mother-offspring dyads). As expected, there were more conflict engagement behaviors during interactions involving

mothers (estimate = 1.77, $SE = 0.06$) than interactions involving fathers (estimate = 1.61, $SE = 0.05$).

Results for conflict disengagement indicated significant main effects of parent and offspring gender (i.e., differences between parent-son dyads vs. parent-daughter dyads). As expected, there was more disengagement during interactions involving fathers (estimate = 1.76, $SE = 0.08$) than interactions involving mothers (estimate = 1.59, $SE = 0.08$). There was also more conflict disengagement during interactions involving sons (estimate = 1.74, $SE = 0.08$) than during interactions involving daughters (estimate = 1.59, $SE = 0.07$).

Associations Between Observed Conflict Behaviors and Participant-Rated Relationship Qualities

To test Hypothesis 4, we used both the actor's and partner's conflict engagement and disengagement behaviors as predictor variables in models of positive and negative relationship qualities. The values presented in Tables 3 and 4 are the simple slopes for parents and offspring. For example, in the model for fathers' relationship qualities in Table 3, the actor effects are fathers' own observed behaviors, the partner effects are offspring's observed behaviors with their fathers and the covariates are fathers' age, ethnicity, education, and marital status. In the model for offspring's relationship qualities in Table 3, the actor effects are offspring's own observed behaviors, the partner effects are fathers' behaviors with their offspring, and the covariates are offspring's age, ethnicity, education, and marital status.

Conflict engagement.—Fathers' and offspring's own conflict engagement was positively associated with their ratings of negative relationship qualities (Table 3). Fathers and offspring with more conflict engagement behaviors reported more negative relationship qualities. Offspring who displayed more conflict engagement with their fathers reported fewer positive relationship qualities. Offspring's behavior was associated with fathers' ratings of negative relationship qualities; fathers whose offspring displayed more conflict engagement behaviors also reported more negative relationship qualities.

Mothers' and offspring's own conflict engagement was also positively associated with their ratings of negative relationship qualities (Table 4). Mothers and offspring with more conflict engagement behaviors reported more negative relationship qualities. Mothers who displayed more conflict engagement reported fewer positive relationship qualities. For offspring and mothers, their conversational partners' behaviors were also associated with their ratings of negative relationship qualities. Offspring whose mothers displayed more conflict engagement behaviors and mothers whose offspring displayed more conflict engagement behaviors reported more negative relationship qualities.

Conflict disengagement.—For fathers and offspring, there were no associations between their own or their partners' conflict disengagement and ratings of relationship qualities (Table 3). Offspring's conflict disengagement was negatively associated with mothers' ratings of positive relationship qualities; mothers whose offspring disengaged more reported fewer positive relationship qualities (Table 4).

DISCUSSION

The present study contributes to research on parent–adult child conflict in three important ways by (a) using videotaped observations to examine behaviors adult children and their parents use to manage conflicts, (b) considering potentially deleterious conflict engagement and disengagement behaviors missing from previous intergenerational studies, and (c) exploring associations between observed behaviors and participant ratings of relationship qualities. Findings illustrate the complex nature of conflict in the parent–adult child tie.

Generational, Ethnic, and Gender Differences in Observed Conflict Behaviors

Findings suggest that parents and adult children differ in their conflict engagement and disengagement behaviors, and these generational differences may vary by ethnicity. African American parents displayed more conflict engagement behaviors than their adult children did, whereas there were no generational differences in conflict engagement behaviors in European American families. Evidence from the marital and parent–adolescent literature suggests that the person who desires change tends to pursue the conflict by actively engaging in the discussion (Caughlin & Ramey, 2005; Kluwer et al., 2000). The structure of the videotaped interaction, where both parents and adult children were free to raise issues, offered members of both generations the opportunity to identify what bothers them about one another. Despite this opportunity, African American offspring employed fewer conflict engagement behaviors than their parents. In contrast, European American offspring and parents both engaged in the conflict. These differences could indicate that the early emphasis on parental authority in African American families (Dixon et al., 2008; Parke & Buriel, 2006) remains salient throughout adulthood. Even as adults, African American offspring may refrain from behaviors that pursue conflict with their parents to avoid being disrespectful, whereas conflict engagement from adult children in European American families may be tolerated more (Parke & Buriel, 2006).

African American offspring, however, engaged in more conflict disengagement than their parents did. African American offspring's greater tendency to disengage could still be interpreted as a sign of offspring's respect for parental authority (Dixon et al., 2008; Parke & Buriel, 2006). Alternatively, African American offspring's greater disengagement

could suggest a desire for autonomy and independence may still play a role in how offspring respond to their parents' requests for changes (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000). By disengaging, offspring may block their parents' requests for change because it is difficult for parents to change a situation without the cooperation of their offspring (Caughlin & Ramey, 2005). Perhaps, African American adult children disengage more than their parents do because they do not view pursuing the conflict with their parents as an acceptable option. Although beyond the scope of this study, differences in parenting practices during childhood may also contribute to how African American and European American adults react to conflicts involving their parents (Dixon et al., 2008). Given the exploratory nature of the current study, further research is needed to elucidate mechanisms underlying these ethnic differences.

Findings also provided support for gender differences in conflict behaviors. Consistent with our hypothesis, conflict disengagement was more frequent during interactions involving fathers and during interactions involving sons, whereas conflict engagement behaviors were more frequent during interactions involving mothers. Together, these findings suggest that the tendency in childhood and adolescence for sons to avoid conflict and for offspring to more actively engage in conflicts with their mother than with their father (Cummings et al., 2002; Kahlbaugh & Haviland, 1994) also characterize interactions between adults and their parents.

Associations Between Observed Conflict Behaviors and Relationship Quality

Finally, conflict engagement and disengagement were related to poorer ratings of relationship quality, although associations differed for fathers, mothers, and offspring. Consistent with research in adolescence, parents and adult children who displayed more conflict engagement behaviors reported poorer quality relationships (Caughlin & Malis, 2004), suggesting that those who perceive more negative relationship qualities are more inclined to pursue the conflict by pressuring their partner for some kind of change in the relationship.

Parents' and adult children's own behaviors, however, were not the only predictors of poorer relationship quality. For both generations, their ratings of relationship qualities were also associated with how their conversational partner behaved. Parents whose offspring displayed more conflict engagement and offspring whose mothers displayed more conflict engagement reported poorer quality relationships. As the less invested partners, offspring may view mothers' pursuit of the conflict as undermining their autonomy, and thus, offspring may be distressed by their mothers' attempts to engage in the conflict discussion (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000; Eldridge & Christensen, 2002). Offspring's perceptions of the quality of the parent–adult child tie may be

more vulnerable to mothers' than to fathers' behaviors due to the emotionally close, contentious nature of the mother-child relationship (Collins & Russell, 1991; Lye, 1996). Still, parents also appeared to perceive their offspring's conflict engagement negatively, emphasizing conflict engagement may have deleterious implications for relationship quality for both generations (Caughlin & Malis, 2004; Heavey et al., 1993).

In contrast, mothers whose adult children disengaged more reported fewer positive relationships qualities. Offspring's disengagement is likely to block their mothers' requests for changes making it difficult for the conflict to be resolved (Caughlin & Golish, 2002). This association was only significant for mothers, suggesting that mothers may be most distressed when their adult children disengage from the discussion, whereas both parents may be distressed by offspring's conflict engagement.

Offspring's ratings of relationship qualities with each parent, however, are not independent of one another. For this reason, it remains unclear if our findings reflect true differences between father- and mother-offspring dyads, emphasizing the need for future work to explore variability in mother-child vs. father-child relationships. Also, given the cross-sectional design of the study, it could be that poorer relationship qualities contribute to a greater use of conflict engagement or disengagement rather than these behaviors contributing to poorer quality relationships. Perceptions of relationship qualities may also depend on the extent to which adults and their parents engage in negative reciprocity, where one partner responds to the other's negative behaviors with more negativity (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995). Our data do not allow for an exploration of these patterns, however, future work should explore whether negative reciprocity characterizes poorer quality parent-adult child relationships.

Observational research on conflict is common in the marital and parent-adolescent literatures (e.g., Berns et al., 1999; Campione-Barr & Smetana, 2004; Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000). Videotaped interactions offer the opportunity to capture not only verbal but also nonverbal behaviors, shedding light on how family members might perceive behaviors during conflict discussions. Further, previous research has found incongruities in how individuals say they behave and how they actually behave (Lefkowitz & Fingerma, 2003), highlighting the value of moving beyond participants' ratings of behaviors to observations of behaviors.

Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

It is necessary to acknowledge some limitations. First, our findings are based on a small, predominantly middle-class European and African American sample. Future work should replicate these findings in a larger more socioeconomically diverse sample. Also parents' and offspring's behavior during videotaped interactions may not reflect

their behavior during actual family conflicts. Prior work suggests that observing people reduces negative behaviors (Gottman, 1979) and limits individuals' freedom to physically disengage from the discussion by leaving the room (Kluwer et al., 1997). We cannot address whether findings reflect ethnic differences in conflict behavior or ethnic differences in reactivity to being videotaped. Our behavior ratings are also vulnerable to observer bias. It is possible that our predominantly European American coders rated African Americans' behaviors differently than African American coders would have. By using two different teams of raters, it is possible that our ICCs were inflated, suggesting the need for additional work that considers conflict engagement and disengagement behaviors.

In conclusion, our findings validate the use of observations by revealing that parents and adult children who reported poorer quality relationships displayed more conflict engagement than those who reported better quality relationships. Further, offspring whose mothers used more conflict engagement reported more negative qualities, whereas mothers whose adult children disengaged more reported more positive qualities, suggesting that relationship quality may also reflect how one's conversational partner behaves. Together, our findings suggest that adults and their parents in poorer quality relationships may engage in potentially ineffective conflict strategies that may make it more difficult to resolve their disagreements.

FUNDING

This work was supported by grants from the National Institute on Aging at the National Institutes of Health (R01 AG17916, R01 AG027769). This work was also supported by the National Institute of Mental Health (5 T32 MH018904 to K. E. Cichy) and the National Institutes on Aging at the National Institutes of Health (5 T32 AG000048 to K. E. Cichy).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We appreciate the efforts of Ellin Spector, Carolyn Rahe, and Ann Shinefield who managed the field study and data collection through the Institute for Survey Research at Temple University. We are grateful to Miriam Moss and Sheryl Potashnik for assistance with recruitment. Elizabeth Hay, Graciela Espinosa-Hernandez, and Shelley Hosterman provided invaluable assistance on all aspects of this project. Finally, we would like to thank our undergraduate research assistants, Donna Anckle, Jodi Bailey, Amanda Gottschall, Sarah Haupt, Alycia Jones, Megan Kowalski, Shawna McKean, Elizabeth Metzger, Laura Miller, Emily Quinn, Lauren Richardson, Theresa Schray, Bethany Snavelly, and Catherine Thieman.

CORRESPONDENCE

Correspondence should be addressed to Kelly E. Cichy, PhD, Department of Human Development & Family Studies, School of Lifespan Development and Educational Sciences, P.O. Box 5190, 405 White Hall, Kent State University, Kent, OH 44242-0001. E-mail: kcichy@kent.edu.

REFERENCES

- Barber, B. K. (1994). Cultural, family, and personal contexts of parent-adolescent conflict. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 56, 375-386. doi:10.2307/353106
- Belle, D. (1991). Gender differences in the social moderators of stress. In A. Monet & R. S. Lazarus (Eds.), *Stress and coping: An anthology* (pp. 258-274). New York: Columbia University Press.

- Berns, S. B., Jacobson, N. S., & Gottman, J. M. (1999). Demand-withdraw interaction in couples with a violent husband. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 67*, 666–674. doi:10.1037//0022-006X.67.5.666
- Birditt, K. S., Miller, L. M., Fingerman, K. L., & Lefkowitz, E. S. (2009). Tensions in the parent and adult child relationship: Links to solidarity and ambivalence. *Psychology and Aging, 24*, 287–295. doi:10.37/a0015196
- Birditt, K. S., Rott, L. M., & Fingerman, K. L. (2009). “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all”: Coping with interpersonal tensions in the parent-child relationship during adulthood. *Journal of Family Psychology, 23*, 769–778. doi:10.1037/a0016486
- Branje, S. J. T. (2008). Conflict management in mother-daughter interactions in early adolescence. *Behaviour, 145*, 1627–1651. doi:10.1163/156853908786131315
- Campione-Barr, N., & Smetana, J. G. (2004). In the eye of the beholder: Subjective and observer ratings of middle-class African American mother-adolescent interactions. *Developmental Psychology, 40*, 927–934. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.40.6.927
- Carstensen, L. L., Gottman, J. M., & Levenson, R. W. (1995). Emotional behavior in long-term marriage. *Psychology and Aging, 10*, 140–149. doi:10.1037/0882-7974.10.1.140
- Caughlin, J. P., & Golish, T. D. (2002). An analysis of the association between topic avoidance and dissatisfaction: Comparing perceptual and interpersonal explanations. *Communication Monographs, 69*(4), 275–295. doi:10.1080/03637750216546
- Caughlin, J. P., & Malis, R. S. (2004). Demand/withdraw communication between parents and adolescents: Connections with self-esteem and substance use. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 21*, 125–148. doi:10.1177/0265407504039843
- Caughlin, J. P., & Ramey, M. E. (2005). The demand/withdraw pattern of communication in parent-adolescent dyads. *Personal Relationships, 12*, 337–355. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.2005.00119.x
- Caughlin, J. P., & Vangelisti, A. L. (2000). An individual differences explanation of why married couples engage in the demand-withdraw pattern of conflict. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 17*, 523–551. doi:10.1177/0265407500174004
- Christensen, A., & Heavey, C. L. (1990). Gender and social structure in the demand-withdraw pattern of marital conflict. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 59*, 73–81. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.59.1.73
- Clarke, E. J., Preston, M., Raksin, J., & Bengston, V. L. (1999). Types of conflict and tensions between older parents and their adult children. *The Gerontologist, 39*, 261–270. doi:10.1093/geront/39.3.261
- Collins, W. A., & Russell, G. (1991). Mother-child and father-child relationships in middle childhood and adolescence: A developmental analysis. *Developmental Review, 11*, 99–136. doi:10.1016/0273-2297(91)90004-8
- Conger, R. D., Ge, X., Elder, G. H., Jr., Lorenz, F. O., & Simons, R. L. (1994). Economic stress, coercive family process and developmental problems of adolescents. *Child Development, 65*, 541–561. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.1994.tb00768.x
- Cummings, E. M., Goeke-Morey, M. C., Papp, L. M., & Dukewich, T. L. (2002). Children’s responses to mothers’ and fathers’ emotionality and tactics in marital conflict in the home. *Journal of Family Psychology, 16*, 478–492. doi:10.1037//0893-3200.16.4.478
- Dixon, S. V., Graber, J. A., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2008). The roles of respect for parental authority and parenting practices in parent-child conflict among African American, Latino, and European American families. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22*, 1–10. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.22.1.1
- Eldridge, K. A., & Christensen, A. (2002). Demand-withdraw communication during couple conflict: A review and analysis. In P. Noller & J. A. Feeney (Eds.), *Understanding marriage: Developments in the study of couple interaction. Advances in personal relationships* (pp. 289–322). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511500077.016
- Fingerman, K. L. (2001). *Aging mothers and their adult daughters: A study in mixed emotions*. New York: Springer.
- Fingerman, K. L., & Birditt, K. S. (2011). Adult children and aging parents. In K. W. Schaie & S. L. Willis (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of aging* (7th ed, pp. 219–232). New York: Elsevier. doi:10.1016/B978-0-12-380882-0.00014-0
- Fingerman, K. L., Chen, P. C., Hay, E., Cichy, K. E., & Lefkowitz, E. S. (2006). Parents’ and offspring’s ambivalent reactions to each other. *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences, 61*, 152–160. doi:10.1093/geronb/61.3.P152
- Fingerman, K. L., Hay, E. L., & Birditt, K. S. (2004). The best of ties, the worst of ties: Close, problematic, and ambivalent relationships across the lifespan. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 66*, 792–808. doi:10.1111/j.0022-2445.2004.00053.x
- Gottman, J. M. (1979). *Marital interaction: Experimental investigation*. New York: Academic Press.
- Gottman, J. M., McCoy, K., Coan, J., & Collier, H. (1996). *The specific affect coding system (SPAFF) for observing emotional communication in marital and family interaction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Heavey, C. L., Layne, C., & Christensen, A. (1993). Gender and conflict in marital interaction: A replication and extension. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 61*, 16–27. doi:10.1037//0022-006X.61.1.16
- Kahlbaugh, P. E., & Haviland, J. M. (1994). Nonverbal-communication between parents and adolescents: A study of approach and avoidance behavior. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior, 18*, 91–113. doi:10.1007/BF02169080
- Kenny, D. A., Kashy, D. A., & Cook, W. (2006). *Dyadic data analysis*. New York: Guilford.
- Kluwer, E. S., Heesink, J. A. M., & Van de Vliert, E. (1997). The marital dynamics of conflict over the division of labor. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 59*, 635–653. doi:10.2307/353951
- Kluwer, E. S., Heesink, J. A. M., & Van-de-Vliert, E. (2000). The division of labor in close relationships: An asymmetrical conflict issue. *Personal Relationships, 7*, 263–282. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.2000.tb00016.x
- Lefkowitz, E. S., Cichy, K. E., Hay, E. L., Espinosa-Hernandez, G., & Fingerman, K. L. (2011). Emotionally-charged conversations between adult offspring and their mothers and fathers. Unpublished manuscript.
- Lefkowitz, E. S., & Fingerman, K. L. (2003). Positive and negative emotional feelings and behaviors in mother-daughter ties in late life. *Journal of Family Psychology, 17*, 607–617. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.17.4.607
- Littell, R. C., Milliken, G. A., Stroup, W. W., & Wolfinger, R. D. (1996). *SAS system for mixed models*. Cary, NC: SAS Institute.
- Lye, D. N. (1996). Adult child-parent relationships. *Annual Review of Sociology, 22*, 79–102. doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.22.1.79
- Martini, T. S., & Busseri, M. A. (2010). Emotion regulation strategies and goals as predictors of older mothers’ and adult daughters’ helping-related subjective well-being. *Psychology and Aging, 25*, 48–59. doi:10.1037/a0018776
- McCoy, K., Cummings, E. M., & Davies, P. T. (2009). Constructive and destructive marital conflict, emotional security and children’s prosocial behavior. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 50*, 270–279. doi:10.1111/j.1469-7610.2008.01945.x
- Noack, P., & Buhl, H. M. (2004). Child-parent relationships. In F. R. Lang & K. L. Fingerman (Eds.), *Growing together: Personal relationships across the life span* (pp. 45–75). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Parke, R. D., & Buriel, R. (2006). Socialization in the family: Ethnic and ecological perspectives. In N. Eisenberg (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Social, emotional, and personality development* (pp. 429–504). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Pitzer, L., Fingerman, K. L., & Lefkowitz, E. S. (2011). Development of the parent adult relationship questionnaire (PARQ). *International Journal*

- of Aging and Human Development*, 72, 111–135. doi:10.2190/AG.72.2.b
- Priester, J., & Petty, R. (2001). Extending the bases of subjective attitudinal ambivalence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80, 19–34. doi:10.1037//0022-3514.80.1.19
- Rossi, A. S., & Rossi, P. H. (1990). *Of human bonding: Parent-child relations across the life course*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Shapiro, A. (2004). Revisiting the generation gap: Exploring the relationships of parent/adult–child dyads. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 58, 127–146. doi:10.2190/EVFK-7F2X-KQNV-DH58
- Singer, J. D., & Willett, J. B. (2003). *Applied longitudinal data analysis: Modeling change and event occurrence*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Snijders, T. A. B., & Bosker, R. (1999). *Multilevel analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Waller, W. (1938). *The family: A dynamic interpretation*. New York: Gordon.