ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The perception of adolescents' inter-parental conflict and accompanied emotional security: A descriptive study

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ABSTRACT

How Egyptian adolescents respond to their parents' inter-parental conflict is relatively unexplored. This descriptive study was completed with adolescents to determine their perceptions of inter-parental conflict and the impact of this on their level of emotional security. Two hundred students from Zagazig city in Egypt aged between 13 and 17 years completed the "Children's perception of inter-parental conflict scale" and "Security in the inter-parental system scale". The findings showed that when adolescents witnessed inter-parental conflict they felt scared, sad, emotionally charged or unable to stop thinking about the conflict that they had witnessed. However, participants were unprepared to assist in trying to solve their parents' conflict. Nurses need to be aware of the negative impact that inter-parental conflict may have on adolescents in their care. Interventions should focus on the preservation of the adolescent's emotional security to prevent negative psychosocial effects occurring in the future.

Key Words: Adolescents, Perception, Inter-parental conflict, Emotional security

1. INTRODUCTION

Egypt is the most populous country in the Arabic region with 82.5 million inhabitants of which 25% are adolescents.[1] Traditionally, adolescents in Egypt live with their parents and some may regularly witness inter-parental conflict.[2] Conflict is defined as any disagreement, difference and argument about an issue that rises in family life.[3] Inter-parental conflict is complex and multifaceted construct as it includes any differences of opinions, whether it is negative or positive between parents.[4, 5] These differences range from minor daily stresses and disagreements to severe verbal, emotional, and physical arguments.[6] Inter-parental conflict can be destructive as the adolescent may witness their parents' dis-

plays of anger and hostility or constructive conflict which depicts good role modeling and the use of problem-solving strategies and affection.[7]

The impact of inter-parental conflict on adolescents depends on whether the parents used constructive or destructive techniques to solve their conflict.[8] There are seven dimensions that can determine the consequences of inter-parental conflict on adolescents and their parents: frequency, intensity, content, resolution, explanation given to the child, child involvement, and mode of expressing the conflict.[9] Destructive inter-parental conflict has a detrimental effect on adolescents and may compromise areas of their normal development. It can lead to the adolescent feeling insecure in

the home environment and to experience subsequent socio-emotional, behavioural and academic disruptions to their life.[4, 10–14] In some cases, this may place the adolescent at risk to participate in antisocial behaviours.[13]

The emotional security model provides an explanation as to why some adolescents from environments with inter-parental conflict may develop antisocial behaviours. The model postulates that parents serve as a safeguard for their adolescents and provide a sense of security and safety[15–17] and this sense of security and safety organizes the child's emotional regulatory experiences (*e.g.*, fear), action tendencies (*e.g.*, withdrawal), and interpersonal appraisals.[18, 19] However, destructive inter-parental conflict disrupts this learning and may lead to the adolescent displaying negative emotions and behavioural deregulation.

In all health care setting, nurses play a pivotal role in assessing and minimizing the impact of inter-parental conflict on adolescents in their care.[20–24] Therefore, they require knowledge and skills to be able to work effectively with the adolescent who grow up in environments where they witness inter-parental conflict and to engage appropriately with the parents to educate them about the impact of their interactions on their child.[20–24]

Worldwide, around 133 to 275 million children and adolescents witness violence in the home annually.[7] In Egypt there are no statistics on the rate of inter-parental conflict but one info-graphic study conducted by Al-Jazeera found that 47% of married, divorced, widowed women experienced domestic violence.[25] This paper adds to knowledge in this area by describing the Egyptian adolescents' perception of inter-parental conflict and the impact on their emotional security. The findings are transferable to other Arabic countries that share many Egyptian parents' cultures and values.

2. METHODS

Permission to conduct this descriptive study was obtained from four school principals in the city of Zagazig. Both parents and adolescents gave written informed consent to participate in the study. The "Children's perception of inter-parental conflict scale (CPIC)"[26] and the "Security in the inter-parental system scale (SISS)" were used for data collection along with a demographic data sheet.[27] Permission to use the SISS and the CPIC were obtained from Davies, Forman *et al.* (2002) and Grych *et al.* (1992).[26, 27]

Both questionnaires were translated to Arabic by a professional independent researcher and back translations were conducted to ensure data did not lose its richness and meaning.[25] The translated version of the questionnaire was then checked by two Arabic/English speaking nursing professors

with experience in adolescent nursing to ensure face validity of the translated questionnaires. Test-retest reliability for the Arabic version CPIC and SISS questionnaires were conducted by computing Cronbach's alpha for each questionnaire: Cronbach's alpha for CPIC were 0.863 and SISS were 0.829, which reflects an acceptable level.[28]

2.1 Sample

A convenience sample of 200 adolescents from the four schools, who consented to participate completed the Arabic version of the questionnaires. The inclusion criteria were: (1) to be students from the selected schools; (2) aged between 13 and 17 years; and (3) willing to participate and commit 20 minutes to complete the two questionnaires. Completion of the questionnaires took each student approximately 20 minutes.

2.2 Data collection

Data collection occurred between March and April in 2014. An Independent researcher explained the study to students providing them with an information sheet and consent form.

2.3 Measures and procedures: Questionnaires

The "Children's perception of inter-parental conflict scale"[26] is used to assess adolescents' perception of conflicts between their parents and uses a three point-Likert scale. The scale consists of 48 items organized into three categories with eight subscales: The first category is conflict properties, which consists of the following four sub-scales: Frequency (6 items), Intensity (7 items), Resolution (6 items), and Triangulation (8 items). The second category is threat and this consists of two sub-scales: Perceived threat (6 items) and Coping Efficacy (6 items). The last category is Self-blame which also has two sub-scales: Content (4 items), Self-blame (5 items). The adolescents responded to each item of the scale by choosing: true (2), sort of true (1), false (0) except for the items that were marked with an asterisk are reverse keyed and were scored as Grych *et al.*'s[26] guidance. The credibility of the sub scales was: Conflict Properties factor (Cronbach's alpha was 0.90), Threat (Cronbach's alpha was 0.83), and for Self-Blame (Cronbach's alpha was 0.78).[26]

2.4 Security in the Inter-parental System Scale

Security in the inter-parental system scale comprised of 37 items developed to assess the dimensions of reactivity (9 items), behavioral dysregulation (3 items), avoidance (7 items), involvement (6 items), constructive family representation (4 items), destructive family representation (4 items) and conflict spill over representation (4 items). The participants rated each item based on how true it was using a 4-point continuum (1 = Not at all true of me, 2 = A little true of me,

3 = Somewhat true of me, 4 = Very true of me). Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale was 0.70 which reflected an acceptable level of credibility.[27]

3. RESULTS

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences SPSS version 17.0. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic and inferential statistics used to establish correlation between the SISS and the CPIC and its subscales.

3.1 Demographics

A total of 200 students participated in the study and 75% (n = 150) were males. The average age was 15.5 years and 183 (91.5%) of the adolescents lived with both their parents (see Table 1).

Adolescents' perceptions of aspects of inter- parental conflict and accompanied emotional security were obtained using CPIC and SISS scales.

3.2 Children's perception of inter-parental conflict scale

The average scores were calculated for the subscales, the mean scores of the participants were: Conflict properties sub-scale (μ = .865; SD = .137), threat sub-scale (μ = 1.18; SD = 0.355) and Self-blame sub-scale (μ =.877; SD = 0.349) (see Table 2).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the adolescents

Items	%	N
Fathers' level of education		
Illiterate	1.5	3
Primary	11.5	23
Secondary	26	52
Higher education	45	90
Post graduate	16	32
Mothers' level of education		
Illiterate	4	8
Primary	9.5	19
Secondary	35.5	71
Higher education	39.5	79
Post graduate	11.5	23
Gender		
Female	25	50
Male	75	150
Where do you live?		
Parents	91.5	183
Single Parents	7.5	15
Relative	1	2
Total		200

Table 2. Mean score of the adolescents' perception for the different subscales of CPIC scale

Subscales		Statement	Mean (SD)	Range
Conflict properties		19	.865 (.137)	.68
	Frequency	6	1.048 (.209)	1.00
	Intensity	7	.746 (.223)	.86
	Resolution	6	.822 (.185)	.83
Threat		12	1.18 (.355)	1.17
	Threat	6	1.22 (.609)	2
	Coping efficacy	6	1.13 (.253)	1.17
Self-blame		9	.877 (.349)	1.22
	Content	4	.817 (.604)	2
	Self-blame	5	.925 (.199)	1.0
Triangulation		5*	1.06 (.376)	1.6

* Researchers exclude three items because too many missing data were found.

One hundred and twelve (56.3%) participants reported that they had never seen their parents arguing or disagreeing with each other but 164 (82.4%) reported that when conflict had occurred, their parents were mean to each other. One hundred and sixty five (82.9%) reported the main source of conflict between parents was around topics related to the house. One hundred and sixty (80.4%) reported other reasons for their parent's conflict. For example, 128 (64.3%) believed arguments between parents were about things related to adolescents in general and 128 (64.3%) were related to things adolescents do at school. One hundred and twenty eight (64.3%) participants believed that conflict emerged when the adolescent did something wrong. Many of the participants blamed themselves for their parents' conflict as they believed

conflict rose as a result their fault (62.8%, n = 125).

A perceived threat for witnessing conflict 193 (96.9%) made adolescents afraid that one or both of their parents would yell at them (82.9, n = 165) as a result they got scared and afraid about what was going to happen to them (92.4%, n = 184). Furthermore, 156 of the participants (78.3%) were worried that one of their parents would get hurt and 65.8% (n = 131) were worried that their parents might get divorced.

One hundred and seventy two (86.4%) participants believed that when their parents had a conflict they worked it out and 174 (87.4%) believed their parents discussed the issue and usually came up with solution because 187 (93.9%) of them reported that when their parents had a disagreement they discuss it quietly and 118 (59.3%) stated their parents did

not push or shove each other during an argument.

One hundred and seventy six (88.4%) of the participants responded to the threat of parental conflict by doing something to make their parents feel better, although 186 (93.4%) of the participants did not know what to do when their parents had argument because 181 (90.9%) of the participants reported that when their parents argue they don't listen to them.

3.3 Security in the inter-parental system scale

On the SISS and its subscales, the mean scores were: SISS (μ = 2.59; SD = 0.19), emotional reactivity sub-scales (μ = 2.65; SD = 0.42), regulation of exposure to parent conflict sub-scales (μ = 2.66; SD = 0.18) and Internal representation sub-scale (μ = 2.51; SD = 0.16) (see Table 3).

Table 3. Mean score of the participants responses to SISS and its sub-scales

Sub scales	Statement	Mean(SD)	Rang
Emotional reactivity	12	2.65 (.425)	1.78
Emotional reactivity	9	2.97 (.395)	1.89
Behavioral dysregulation	3	2.34 (.494)	2
Regulation of exposure to parent conflict	13	2.66 (.183)	.85
Avoidance	7	2.49 (.198)	1
Involvement	6	2.82 (.258)	1
Internal representation	12	2.51 (.161)	.75
Constructive family representation	4	2.23 (.432)	1.5
destructive family representation	4	2.94 (.414)	1.75
Conflict spillover representation	4	2.36 (.516)	1.5
Total	37	2.59 (.199)	.76

Adolescents displayed a plethora of emotions as a result of their parents conflict; they felt scared (μ = 2.99; SD = .546), sad (μ = 2.88; SD = 0.514), unsafe (μ = 2.62; SD = .646) and angry (μ = 2.60; SD= .673). They were also unable to calm down (μ = 3.03; SD = 0.388) and could not stop thinking about their parents problems (μ = 3.34; SD = 0.572). However, they hid their feelings from their parents (μ = 3.01; SD = .420). Participants reacted negatively to their parents conflict by yelling on their parents and siblings (μ = 2.60; SD = 0.673) and caused trouble to them (μ = 2.49; SD = 0.501).

Adolescents worried about their family's future (μ = 3.35; SD = 0.583), and their parent's next move (μ = 3.10, SD = 0.433) and they did not believe their parents still loved each other (μ = 2.38; SD = .496). Although adolescents tried to preserve their emotional security they did not really know what to do (μ = 2.91; SD = .447) and they did nothing even though they, wished that they could help their parents in solv-

ing their conflict (μ = 2.59; SD = .493). Some participants tried to do nice things to their parents to assist in resolving the situation (μ = 4.99; SD = .624).

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study is the first study that has described Egyptian adolescents' emotional security and their perceptions of their parents' conflict. The findings demonstrate that when adolescents witnessed inter-parental conflict they complained of negative psychosocial consequences, which expose them to sense of insecurity that may place them at risk of internalizing and externalizing their adjustment difficulties. This finding is consistent with other research.[29, 30] Participants also reported experiencing academic and social problems.[5, 10–14, 31, 32] From a cognitive-contextual standpoint, intra-parental conflict served as a stressor that triggered the adolescents to cope with negative emotions that rise from witnessing this conflict.[33] Therefore, the adolescents' perceptions of marital dispute are crucial because it affects their

future coping style.[31, 34]

Based on the cognitive theory, adolescents who witnessed their parents' conflict may display similar behavior patterns in the future.[8] Adolescents' emotional security regarding the marital discord can be also described by using the three elements of the emotional security hypothesis.[35] That is, when the inter-parental conflict occurs, the magnitude of the consequences on the adolescents can be determined according to three variables. Firstly, the frequent exposure to inter-parental conflict put adolescent at risk of experiencing unwanted feelings like sadness, anger, and fear.[35] In this current study, regardless to the frequency of conflicts that participant witnessed, they reported a plethora of emotional dis-regulations which may increase their risk for adjustment problems. Secondly, adolescents gain a sense of security when they are able to minimize, control or resolve their parents conflict by either using constructive or destructive behavioural methods.[35] Although some participants in the current study used both of the methods, the majority reported that they did not know what to do. This may also increase their risk of developing maladaptive coping strategies in future. Lastly, adolescents are able to build up and understand inter-parental conflict based on their cognitive abilities and past experiences with conflict.[35] Adolescents who observed their parents reactions during times of conflicts and how they resolved it positively, learned necessary skills to overcome any potential conflict or challenge they may encounter in the future. This is supported by other researchers[36] who stated that parental conflicts that are resolved positively can be beneficial to parents and their children as children may learn how to solve their own conflicts in adaptive ways with others. This view is supported by previous research of the same result.[8, 37–41]

There is a need for teaching parents how to solve their conflict constructively to maintain the sense of security between the family members. Previous research found that teaching parents what to do to handle the conflict in a constructive way led to positive changes in their relationship, which in turn reflected on their children level of security and improved their adjustment to internal and external stressors.[42, 43] Nurses may organize meetings with parents to share with them experiences and skills in solving conflicts. There is also a need to teach adolescents to trust their abilities and learn when and how to interfere with their parents' conflict. This in turn will have a positive impact on participants' level of emotional security.

This preliminary study describes adolescents' perception of their inter-parental conflict from their perspective, there is a need to triangulate on their parents perspective regarding their conflict to obtain broader understanding to the phenomena under study; hence, we recommend future research to conduct a study considering both parents and their children.

The findings of this study generated new knowledge and understanding in this area of health care that is not searched in depth before in Arabic region. The findings will prepare community nurses, teachers and counsellors facilitate with knowledge that facilitate engagement with adolescents and their parents to assist them to better support both themselves and their family and to avoid any future destructive conflict. Previous research suggested that nurses have to be equipped with necessary knowledge and training to educate, support and assist parents to constructively solve their conflict so that adolescents can avoid negative consequences of their parents' conflict.[44]

In conclusion, the common dominator between adolescents at the current study is the stress and negative emotions that adolescents displayed. Witnessing parents' conflict and experiencing such negative emotions may adversely impact on the future of the adolescents. Health care workers need to work closely with adolescents and need to address their psycho-emotional health needs in future health care policies.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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