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Exploring Warmth and Conflict in Parent-Adolescent Relationships

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BACKGROUND

- Family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997) is a framework that can be used to understand the quality of parent-adolescent relationships and the interrelatedness of relationships within a family system.
- Bowen (1978) identified 8 interlocking concepts of family systems theory. "Triangles" is a concept based on the idea that the triangle is the smallest stable relationship system. The triangle is made of two parts harmony and one part conflict.
- The increase in conflict during adolescent years decreases the levels of harmony (Smetana, 1989). Grounded in family systems theory, we can also expect that turmoil in one relationship can effect the functioning in other family relationships and individual adjustment.

RESEARCH GOALS

- Examine gender differences in parent-adolescent warmth and conflict
*Test for mean differences
- Examine associations among parent-adolescent warmth and conflict
*Test for correlation among variables
- Examine how conflict affected adolescent adjustment
* Test for correlation between conflict and depression

METHODS

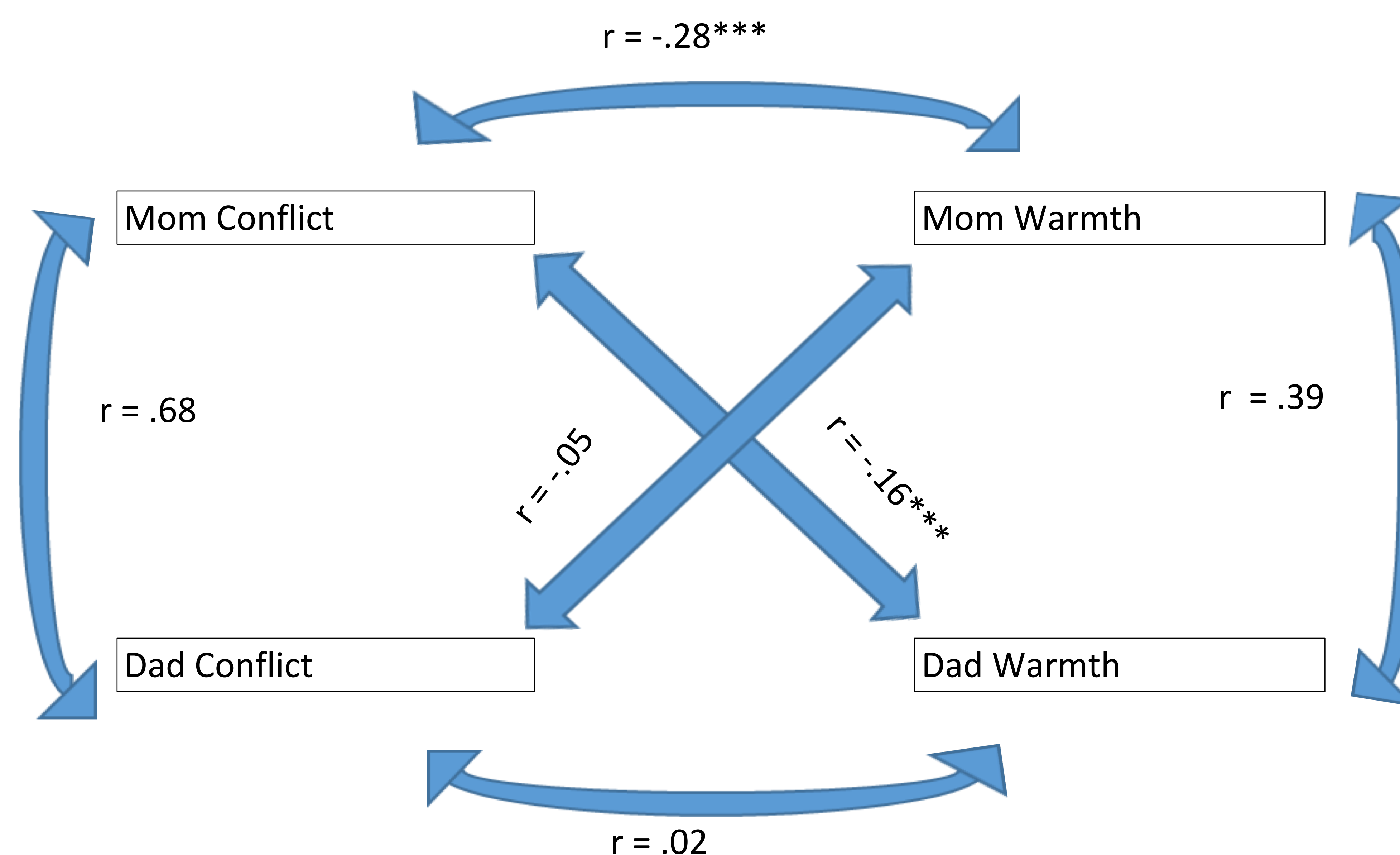
- Data was collected from surveys that were distributed to at school. 54% of adolescents were female and were in 6th (n = 110), 7th (n = 108), or 8th (n = 79) grade. Collection of responses and evaluations resulted in observing the following factors:
- Parent-Adolescent Warmth.** Adolescents rated the degree of warmth and acceptance in their relationships with their mothers and fathers on an 8-item scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Sample item: "My mother/father tells me or shows me that she/he likes me just the way I am." $\alpha = .87$ for mothers, $.95$ for fathers.
- Parent-Adolescent Conflict.** Adolescents rated how often they have conflicts with their mother and father in 11 domains (e.g., school, social life) on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 6 (several times a day). $\alpha = .82$ for mothers, $.92$ for fathers.
- Depression.** Adolescents were asked a series of 10 questions using the Children's Depression Inventory and reported on their mood and feelings over the past two weeks. $\alpha = .83$

RESULTS

RQ1: Are there gender differences in parent-adolescent warmth and conflict?

		Independent Samples Test								
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Child-Mother Conflict	Equal variances assumed	.274	.601	.881	268	.379	1.14272	1.29779	-1.41244	3.69788
Child-Mother Warmth	Equal variances assumed	.905	.342	.936	270	.350	-.06695	.07153	-.20778	.07387
Child-Father Warmth	Equal variances assumed	.464	.496	.475	257	.635	.05277	.11106	-.16593	.27147
Child-Father Conflict	Equal variances assumed	1.343	.248	.290	250	.772	.49709	1.71229	-2.87526	3.86945

RQ2: Does conflict spillover to other relationships?



RQ3: Is parent-adolescent conflict related to adolescent depression?

- Mother-adolescent conflict and depression, $r = .29, p < .001$
- Father-adolescent conflict and depression, $r = .20, p < .001$

CONCLUSION

Contrary to expectations, there were no gender differences in parent-adolescent conflict or warmth. Interestingly, mother-adolescent conflict was strongly associated with father adolescent-conflict and mother-adolescent warmth was positively associated with father-adolescent warmth. Further, more mother-adolescent conflict was associated with less warmth in father-adolescent relationships. These results underscore elements of family systems theory that suggest relationships do not develop in isolation as spillover was evident in these results. This information is important as it helps us better understand the mind of the adolescent and relationships within families. Although conflict is normative, it can be problematic if it spills over to other relationships or impairs adolescent well-being.