

Masaryk University  
Faculty of Social Studies  
Institute for Research on Children, Youth and Family

# FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLDS IN BRNO A SLICE OF LONGITUDINAL SELF-REPORTS

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Brno 2008

This book and relevant research activities were supported by the research plan of Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, MSM 0021622406 „Psychological and social characteristics of children, youth and families, development of personality in the time of changes of modern society”.

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Faculty of Social Studies, Institute for Research on Children, Youth, and Family, Brno, 2008

ISBN 978-80-210-4755-6

## 17.

# Interparental Conflict as Perceived by Adolescents

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Researchers, as well as psychologists with clinical practice have long been observing that conflicts between parents and certain signs of maladaptation of child or adolescent often occur simultaneously. The assumption that the quality of marital relationship is a key predictor of problems in development of child or adolescent is not new in psychology (Davies et al., 2002). A number of empirical studies carried out during the last quarter of a century confirm this general hypothesis. Dissatisfaction in marriage and conflict between parents are confirmed to be strong predictors causing a wide range of adjustment difficulties in children or adolescents (e.g. Grych & Fincham, 2001). Examination of interparental conflict in connection with divorce situation has come to conclusion that facing interparental conflicts is much more harmful for adjustment of adolescents, than the fact of divorce itself (Emery, 1982; Neighbours, Forehand, & Bau, 1997).

Early studies (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Davies et al., 2002; Grych & Fincham, 1990) established that interparental conflict is associated with a wide range of psychological disorders or problems in both children (Grych & Fincham, 2001) and adolescents. Interparental conflict perceptions were found to be related to lower self-esteem and self-efficacy, higher level of anxiety, anger and aggression (Enos & Handal, 1986) or accelerated maturation and higher vulnerability (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976), depression and physical disorders (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000), poorer school results and lower ability to solve problems (Long, 1987).

Views of the period of adolescence as more emotional and vulnerable in the context of interparental conflict, makes examination of the interparental conflict perceptions within this developmental period even more salient (see meta-analysis Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000).

### **Choice of the instrument**

To describe the marital conflict in families with adolescents we have chosen a measure that gives the opportunity to judge several dimensions of the marital conflict by its witnesses – i.e. perception of an interparental conflict reported by an adolescent. We have chosen this alternative on the basis of previous research showing that child or adolescent perception of interparental conflict is a stronger predictor of adaptation difficulties than the reports of the persons, i.e. parents, involved in the conflict (Cummings,

Davies, & Simpson, 1994; Davern, Steiger, & Luk, 2005). Further we wanted to use a questionnaire to portray the interparental conflict as a multidimensional phenomenon. In previous studies the interparental conflict was operationalized only in terms of its frequency and intensity (see overview Grych & Fincham, 1990), further progress in investigation was made within studies that had already measured some other aspects of this phenomenon as well – e.g. the content of the conflict (e.g. Hanson, Saunders & Kistner, 1992) and the method of its solution (e.g. Kempton, Thomas, & Forehand, 1989).

### **Instrument description**

Children's Perceptions of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC) is an instrument for measuring important dimensions of the interparental conflict developed by Grych, Seid and Fincham (1992). It is based on one of the main theoretical approaches to investigating interparental conflict – cognitive-contextual framework of interparental conflict that presumes the impact of the conflict depends on how it is perceived by the child or the adolescent. The way child perceives the conflict varies depending on the characteristics (e.g. intensity, content, duration, solution), contextual factors (distal factors: previous experience with the interparental conflict, emotional atmosphere in the family, temperament and gender of the child; proximal factors: expectation, mood) and level of development (Grych & Fincham, 1990). CPIC was developed to assess objective characteristics of conflict (frequency, intensity and solution), as well as child's evaluation of the conflict. This evaluation includes the level of threat perceived by child when exposed to a conflict, and also evaluation of his/her coping abilities in such a context, how uneasy he/she feels about the conflict and to what extent he/she feels that he/she is involved in the conflict. The original version comprises 49 items measuring the following nine aspects of parental conflict:

- Frequency – perceived frequency of the conflicts (*„I often see my parents arguing.”*)
- Intensity – perceived level of manifest aggression within rows between parents (shouting, breaking things, physical attacks...) (*„My parents get really mad when they argue.”*)
- Resolution – the way how parents usually solve conflicts (*„When my parents disagree about something they usually come up with a solution.”*)
- Content – shows whether the child or the adolescent perceives the conflict as an something associated with his/her own personality or his/her deeds (*„My parents usually argue or disagree because of thing that I do.”*)
- Threat – focused on danger perceived by child (adolescent) resulting from the conflict situation between parents (*I get scared when my parents argue.”*)
- Coping efficacy – focused on how he/she copes with the situation of being exposed to the interparental conflict and on perceived

chance to interfere in the interparental conflict and potentially affect it („I don't know what to do when my parents have arguments.”)

- Self-blame – perceiving the conflict as his/her own fault (*It's usually my fault when my parents argue.*)
- Triangulation – the child perceives that he/she has been „drawn” into the conflict between parents („I feel caught in the middle when my parents argue.”)
- Stability – perceiving stable roots of the conflict (*The reasons my parents argue never change.*).

## **Adaptation of the instrument**

Two translations were reviewed by three experts, which lead to choice and adjustment of wording of individual items. On the basis of consensus between expert critics and in accordance with previous research results (e.g. items providing the Stability factor, according to the authors – „My parents do quarrel because they are not happy with each other; My parents do quarrel, because they do not really love each other; My parents do quarrel because they do not know how to get on well with each other”), some items had been excluded already before the pilot survey. The resulting version was used in a pilot study in a sample of nine-graders ( $n = 256$ , 56% girls, age 14 to 17, mean age 14.8,  $SD = .72$ ). Further items were excluded after the pilot due to low variability (e.g. „My parents push each other in a quarrel” or „Parents break things or throw them when having a quarrel”). The final Czech version of CPIC comprises 35 items that make 8 dimensions (the dimension *Stability* was excluded). The respondents evaluate each statement on a three-point scale as true, partly true, or not true.

Based on EFA of their data Grych, Seid and Fincham (1992) advise to use three secondary scales optimal in terms of both the theoretical assumptions and the empirical use. High score on the scale of „conflict properties“, means high frequency, intensity of conflict and of its continuation. The scale of „threat“ reflects the level of danger perceived by child when exposed to a conflict and his/her ability to cope with the conflict. The scale of „blame“ represents the frequency of conflicts related to child and the level of blaming oneself for the conflict to have emerged as perceived by child. Conflict properties are a strong predictor of behavioral and emotional problems, both externalized as well as internalized.

## **Statistical description of scales**

The Czech version of CPIC includes 8 scales – Frequency (FRQ), Resolution (RES), Intensity (INT), Coping efficacy (CPN), Perceived threat (THR), Triangulation (TRG), Self-blame (SBL), and Content (CON). Descriptive statistics for these scales are summarized in Table 17.1. Individual scale scores are computed as means of responses. Thus they keep the scale of individual items from 1 (minimum) to 3 (maximum).

Except the Coping efficacy, all scores are heavily skewed. Correlations among the CPIC scales are shown in Table 17.2.

**Table 17.1. Moment and ordinal descriptive statistics of CPIC scales.**

		FRQ	INT	RES	CON	THR	CPN	SBL	TRG
<i>N</i>	Valid	532	531	532	534	533	529	534	534
	Missing	22	23	22	20	21	25	20	20
<i>M</i>		1.56	1.78	2.43	1.22	1.35	1.96	1.21	1.33
<i>SD</i>		.54	.56	.53	.37	.40	.50	.31	.37
Skewness <sup>*)</sup>		.91	.42	-.80	1.89	1.22	.02	1.89	1.24
Kurtosis <sup>**)</sup>		-.12	-.68	-.13	3.61	.90	-.86	4.50	1.15
Minimum		1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Maximum		3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	2.75
Percentiles	5	1.0	1.0	1.3	1.0	1.0	1.2	1.0	1.0
	10	1.0	1.0	1.7	1.0	1.0	1.4	1.0	1.0
	25	1.2	1.4	2.0	1.0	1.0	1.6	1.0	1.0
	50	1.4	1.8	2.7	1.0	1.2	2.0	1.0	1.3
	75	2.0	2.2	3.0	1.3	1.6	2.4	1.3	1.5
	90	2.4	2.6	3.0	1.7	2.0	2.6	1.5	1.9
	95	2.6	2.8	3.0	2.0	2.2	2.8	1.8	2.0
N of items (in original version)		5 (6)	5(7)	3(6)	3(4)	5(6)	5(6)	4(5)	4(5)
Internal consistency ( $\alpha$ )		.84	.86	.73	.72	.72	.73	.65	.59

<sup>\*)</sup>S.E. = .11; <sup>\*\*)</sup>S.E. = .21

**Table 17.2. CPIC scale correlations.**

<i>r</i>	FRQ	INT	RES	CON	THR	CPN	SBL
INT	.74						
RES	-.67	-.63					
CON	.16	.10	-.07				
THR	.39	.50	-.36	.19			
CPN	-.20	-.32	.27	-.16	-.39		
SBL	.16	.09	-.10	.68	.13	-.04	
TRG	.38	.36	-.30	.16	.44	-.17	.14

$r_{crit}$  for 1% two-tailed significance is .11; for 5% two-tailed significance it is .08.

## Tests of theoretical assumptions about the CPIC

We used identical procedure for factoring CPIC as the original authors, i.e. we factored primary scale scores, not items. Based on the results of EFA, authors write that CPIC is best described by a three correlated factors (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). Three-factor solution allows us to differentiate between *conflict characteristics* (intensity and frequency) from adolescent's subjective meaning of the conflict (*threat* presented by the conflict, *self-blame* related to the conflict). In a two-factor model, all scales but Content and Self-blame join in one factor the substantive meaning of which is unclear (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). The fit of three-dimensional model (Figure 17.1) to our data was estimated by confirmatory factor analysis. Because the fit was not completely satisfactory, we tested several alternative models that differ mainly in the role of the Triangulation scale. The original model includes Triangulation in the factor of Threat. That is where it is included in preadolescence studies and we assume it plays the same role in early and middle adolescence. The second model includes Triangulation in the Blame factor. Third model, used for late adolescents, includes Triangulation in the Properties factor. For comparison we estimated three further models – a two-factor model that joins the highly-correlated factors of Properties and Threat into one factor, a three-factor model that includes Triangulation both in Properties and in Threat and finally a three-factor model completely without the Triangulation scale.

To estimate the models we used robust diagonally weighted least squares method in LISREL 8.80 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2006). The fit indices for all six models are included in Table 17.3. It is clear that model 1 (Figure 17.1) fits the data better than model 2, although in either case the fit is far from good.

Based on model 1 we constructed three secondary scales as simple sums of primary scales – Conflict Properties, Threat and Blame. Descriptive statistics for these scales are presented in Table 17.4. The estimates of internal consistency are satisfactory for all scales.

**Table 17.3. Tested models and their fit indices.**

Model	<i>S-B</i>	$\chi^2$	df	P	RMSE	H's	AGFI	CFI
	$\chi^{2*})$							
1. 3F TRG -> Threat	66.5	119.0	18	< .01	.07	265	.99	.98
2. 3F TRG -> Blame	228.6	411.6	17	< .01	.16	75	.45	.90
3. 3F TRG -> Properties	87.5	158.8	18	< .01	.09	202	.98	.97
4. 2F	138.0	25.1	20	< .01	.11	138	.98	.94
5. 3F without TRG	49.6	91.5	12	< .01	.08	268	.99	.98
6. 3F TRG -> Threat & Properties	72.0	106.8	17	< .01	.07	288	.99	.98

<sup>\*)</sup> Satorra-Bentler scaled  $\chi^2$

Figure 17.1. Three-factor model of CPIC (model 1). DWLS, standardized solution.

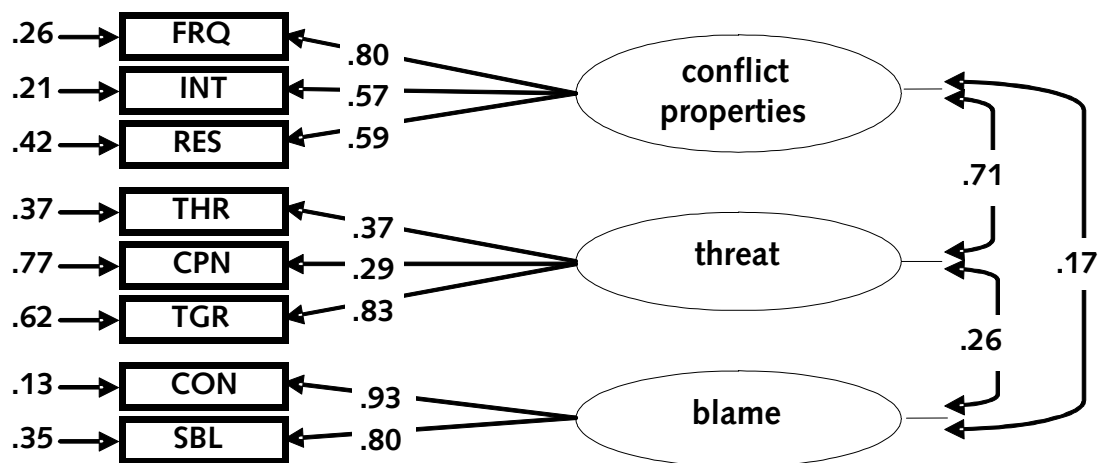


Table 17.4. Descriptive statistics of secondary scales of CPIC.

		Conflict properties	Threat	Blame
N	Valid	531	528	534
	Missing	23	26	20
<i>M</i>		4.91	4.72	2.44
<i>SD</i>		1.44	.95	.63
Skewness <sup>*)</sup>		.73	.71	2.03
Kurtosis <sup>**)</sup>		-.29	.42	5.03
Minimum		3.00	3.00	2.00
Maximum		9.00	8.10	5.75
Percentiles	5	3.00	3.40	2.00
	10	3.23	3.60	2.00
	25	3.73	4.00	2.00
	50	4.60	4.60	2.25
	75	5.87	5.25	2.58
	90	7.12	6.00	3.42
95		7.73	6.50	3.75
N of subscales		3	3	2
Internal consistency ( $\alpha$ ) <sup>***)</sup>		.92	.83	.77

<sup>\*)</sup>S.E. = .11; <sup>\*\*)</sup>S.E. = .21; <sup>\*\*\*)</sup> Computed as a linear combination of primary scales.

## Conclusion

Considering the psychometric properties of the Czech version of CPIC it appears to be a sufficiently valid measure of several aspects of adolescents'



perception of interparental conflict. Even though we shortened most of the scales, our results are similar to those found by Grych, Seid and Fincham (1992). The measure is far from perfect, though. The scales of Self-blame and Triangulation have low internal consistency and the role of the latter scale in the factor structure is unclear. We can hypothesize that Triangulation, i.e. how much the adolescent feels to be drawn into the parents' conflict, depends on cognitive development, which changes this dimension's role in the overall representation of the conflict.

Interparental conflict, its perception, evaluations by children or adolescents and its influences on their experiencing and behavior both in short-term and long-term perspective are an important issue in research of personality development or coping. CPIC can be considered a useful and reliable instrument to capture this important aspect of family life in mid adolescence. We made it part of our longitudinal battery with the intention to prospectively follow this construct through adolescence, which should complement the mostly cross-sectional studies (Fincham, Grych, & Osborne, 1994).

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Stanislav Ježek, Lenka Lacinová (Eds.)  
Fifteen-year-olds in Brno: A Slice of Longitudinal Self-Reports

Published by Masaryk University in 2008  
Supported by the research plan of Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the  
Czech Republic MSM0021622406

1<sup>st</sup> edition, 2008            200 copies  
Printed by MSD, spol. s r.o., Lidická 23, Brno

Cover design: Stanislav Ježek

ISBN 978-80-210-4755-6