

## PARENTAL COMPLEMENTARITY AND PARENTAL CONFLICT<sup>1</sup>

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Toman (4, 5, 6) has drawn attention to the spouses' sibling positions in their families of origin as social learning variables of importance in determining adjustment to the conjugal role and the degree of harmony and mutuality experienced in marriage. According to Toman, the spouse-to-be has had an opportunity to learn, over an extended period of years, certain role behaviors in relation to siblings which may be transferred to the marital situation. Toman assumes that "the closer the new relationships come in kind to old ones, to those already entertained, other things being equal, the better will the person be prepared for the new ones, and the greater their likelihood to last and be happy and successful" (6, p. 6). Authority and sex role behaviors vis-a-vis peers are thought to be the most salient aspects of childhood relationships which are transferred. Since the conjugal relationships to which they transfer involve the *interaction* of partners, however, the extent to which the spouses' antecedent learning patterns are congruently matched is of crucial importance.

The optimal preparation for the husband's conjugal role, in the American culture, is assumed to be the condition in which he was reared in a family of origin with multiple children, in which he was the oldest brother of a younger sister or sisters. In such a position, he would have learned authority and sex role behaviors with respect to younger females. The optimal training for his wife, then, in order to provide a congruent match, would be a family of origin with multiple children, in which she was the younger sister of an older brother or brothers. In this position, she would have been able to learn complementary authority role behaviors vis-a-vis older peers, as well as learning sex role behaviors toward males. Under these circumstances, intrafamilial authority should rest largely with the husband, and interpersonal conflict should be minimal. Under the reverse condition, where the husband was the younger brother of an older sister or sisters, and the wife was the older sister of a younger brother or brothers,

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authority would be expected to rest largely with the wife. In addition, interpersonal conflict should remain low, since the patterns of antecedent experiences are congruently matched. Other possible combinations are less ideal and would be expected to lead to mixed authority and high conflict. The marriage of an older sister of sisters and an older brother of brothers, for example, would be expected to produce mixed and competitive authority relationships as well as relatively high conflict.

Thus, the ordinal position of the child and the sex of the siblings in the family of origin are expected to influence later marital adjustment. This influence should be evident in the spouses' authority relationship to each other, and the degree of conflict between them. Therefore, measures of interpersonal dominance and conflict can be expected to vary as a function of the adequacy of matching of antecedent social learning experiences of the spouses, as expressed in degree of rank and sex complementarity. This was the hypothesis of the present study.

#### METHOD

A 5-page questionnaire was developed which contained items concerning the parents' sibling positions as well as parental authority and conflict in the home. The questionnaire was administered to all entering freshmen at the University of Kentucky, during the fall orientation and testing period, 1963. Although an initial sample of approximately 1800 questionnaires was available, only the 1503 students who completed the items relevant to the present study and who reported having been reared in an intact parental home (both natural parents living together) were included in the final sample.

The composition of the sibship of each parent was determined by responses to five items describing whether the parent was a member of a family in which he (she) had: (*a*) no sisters or brothers (only child); (*b*) one or more older brothers; (*c*) one or more older sisters; (*d*) one or more younger brothers; and (*e*) one or more younger sisters. More than one item could be checked in describing the parent. From these descriptions, 256 different patterns were identified by taking all consistent combinations of the items. In 225 of these patterns both parents were members of multiple-child families, and in 31 patterns one or both parents were only children.

Three degrees of complementarity were determined—for the 225 multiple-child and 31 only-child family patterns separately—by considering both rank and sex matching for the spouses. For multiple-child families, the degrees of complementarity were defined by: (*a*) complete matching for both rank and sex, or a mismatch on one variable for one parent only; (*b*) partial mismatching on one or both variables by both parents; or (*c*) complete mismatching by both parents on one or both variables. For only-child families the categories were comparable except that they all included varying degrees of mismatching, since complete complementarity is not possible with one or both parents coming from such families (*6*).

Of the 18 patterns of multiple-child families falling in category (*a*), defined above, 9 were designated as husband dominant families and 9 as wife dominant families. In the former the husband was reared with younger sisters and the wife was reared with older brothers; in the latter the opposite relationships existed.

Husband and wife dominant families were expected to differ on measures of parental dominance.

Parental conflict was measured by three questionnaire items relating to the presence of arguments and disagreements between the parents. Families were classified as high in conflict if the student responded in the positive direction to one or more of these items.

Parental dominance was measured by responses to three items each for three types of parental authority: (a) authority between the two parents; (b) parent-child authority and control; and (c) parental discipline of the child. Forced choices between parents were required. All items were scored in the father-dominant direction, and families were classified as father dominant, in each area separately, if one or more of the three items in the category was checked. A total score for father dominance was also obtained by summing the father choices for the combined set of nine items.

## RESULTS

1. Parent conflict as a function of degree of complementarity in the marriage was evaluated for multiple-child and only-child families separately.

*Multiple-child families.* Chi-square analyses were performed by classifying the 1264 multiple-child families according to three degrees of interparent complementarity, and presence or absence of interparent conflict as perceived by the reporting student-child. This was done for rank complementarity and sex complementarity separately, and for these two combined.

The results were in the expected direction, but only for rank complementarity were they significant at the .01 level of confidence. Specifically, the findings were: for rank complementarity,  $\chi^2 = 9.28$ ,  $p < .01$ ; for sex complementarity,  $\chi^2 = 3.93$ ,  $p < .25$ ; and for rank and sex complementarity combined,  $\chi^2 = 7.90$ ,  $p < .025$ ; with two degrees of freedom for all three chi squares.

*Only-child families.* A comparable analysis of the frequency of reported conflict as a function of degrees of rank and sex complementarity was also done for the 239 only-child families. But the comparisons failed to reach significance. However, it should be recalled that the range of complementarity is considerably restricted in families involving only-child parents, since complete complementarity is not possible.

2. Dominance relationships between the parents were also evaluated by chi-square analysis. Differences in the frequency of reported father dominance in each of the three areas of parent authority failed to attain significance. Total father-dominance scores were also compared between the nine patterns of husband-dominant and nine patterns of wife-dominant families, by *t* test. This comparison also failed

to reach significance, although the difference was in the expected direction. When only the two patterns yielding ideal rank-complementarity differences were compared separately, the results still remained non-significant. Therefore, the dominance data failed to support the expected relationship between rank complementarity patterns and interparent authority.

#### DISCUSSION

The present study lends support to Toman's finding regarding rank complementarity and absence of interpersonal conflict. Lack of support for his other findings must be viewed in the light of restrictions of the present study. In particular, the use of college students as respondents curtails the number of subcultural variables represented in the sample and relies entirely on the child's point of view regarding parental dominance and conflict. Further, restricting the sample to intact families probably eliminated an important portion of the mismatched high conflict families (7, 8). Since the relationship between rank complementarity and interparent conflict emerged despite these limitations, it would appear to be a robust and meaningful effect.

An interesting implication for the study of child development appears worthy of note. Assuming the relationship between complementarity of family-constellation variables and parental conflict to be reliable, and noting previous reports of a correlation between interparent conflict and the development of social interest in the child (1, 2, 3), a relationship between complementarity of social learning backgrounds of the parents and subsequent social interest development in their children suggests itself.

#### SUMMARY

Measures of interparental conflict and authority were related to patterns of rank and sex complementarity in the parents of 1503 college students. The results with multiple-child families confirmed the predicted relationship between complementarity of the parents and interparent conflict. The expected relationship between sex complementarity and interparent conflict was, however, not confirmed. The expected relationship between patterns of rank complementarity and parental authority was also not found. Restrictions on the generality of the present study were considered, and an implication for the study of child development was cited.

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