UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
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Interparental Conflict and Adolescent Physiological Functioning, Health, and Adjustment

DISSERTATION

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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By

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Abstract

The goal of this dissertation was to explore theoretically suggested but previously untested links among parental marital conflict and offspring physiological functioning, adjustment, and physical health. These associations were examined in late adolescence, a developmental period neglected in the relevant literatures. Specifically, this dissertation examined whether marital conflict is associated with dysregulated physiological stress responses to both conflict- and non-conflict-specific stressors, as well as whether marital conflict is associated with greater mental and physical health problems. Additionally tested was whether adolescent conflict appraisals, parent-adolescent relationships, and physiological functioning mediate or moderate the association between marital conflict and adolescent outcomes, and whether these associations vary based on parent and adolescent gender. To achieve these goals, a multi-method, follow-up study was conducted involving families (n = 42) who previously participated in the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. Parent and adolescent report, observer ratings of marital conflict, adolescent participation in two stressors, and assessment of cortisol and cardiovascular functioning were included.

Results suggest that marital conflict is associated with dysregulated adolescent stress responses and support the habituation hypothesis that marital conflict is associated with dampened physiological stress responses. There was only limited evidence that marital conflict was associated with physical and mental health. In addition, results consistently indicated that conflict appraisals, parent-adolescent relationships, and physiological functioning operated as moderators of the association between marital conflict and adolescent outcomes rather than mediators. There was evidence that conflict appraisals and parent-adolescent relationship quality may buffer the negative effects of marital conflict on adolescents, but also that high marital
conflict or poor-quality relationships with parents may produce physiological dysregulation. Although physiological functioning consistently moderated the association between marital conflict and adolescent health, it remains unclear exactly how these variables influence adolescent health. Finally, there was little evidence for differences in these associations based on adolescent gender or interactions between parent and adolescent gender. Differences were evident based on parent gender, and suggested that mothers may be more vulnerable to spillover of marital conflict to parent-adolescent relationships than fathers. Results are discussed in the context of the relatively high-functioning, stable, and wealthy sample.