An Exploratory Analysis of Dynamic Emotional Communication Between Parents and Adolescents During Conflict Discussions

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Adolescence is a developmental period when parent-child relationships undergo transformations that can increase conflict and negative emotion during parent-child interactions (Smetana, 2011), often resulting in poor adolescent adjustment (Moed et al., 2014). However, research on parent-adolescent conflict has largely ignored the role of positive emotions in the outcomes of such interactions and has relied on global measures of behavior at the expense of examining moment-to-moment fluctuations in emotion between parents and adolescents. The present investigation explored the dynamic coordination of parents’ and adolescents’ emotions during conflict discussions across level of reported satisfaction with the outcome of the discussions.

In a sample of 50 parent-adolescent dyads (M adolescent age=14.84 years), the Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF; Coan & Gottman, 2007) was used to code parent and adolescent emotions in real time during a 10-minute conflict discussion. Codes were divided into negative (e.g., contempt, anger, sadness) and positive emotion (affection, humor, validation, and interest). Parents’ and adolescents’ emotions were coded separately resulting in two synchronized streams of data. Data were analyzed using cross-recurrence quantification analysis (CRQA; Coco & Dale, 2014), a method for comparing two time series’ evolution over time to uncover patterns of influence. Parents and adolescents separately rated their satisfaction with the discussion after the conclusion of the interaction.

Dyads were split into two groups: low and high satisfaction with the discussion. High-satisfaction dyads had lower incidence and distinctly absent synchrony in negative emotion. Conversely, low-satisfaction dyads showed higher levels and stronger synchrony in their negativity. The interaction between time lag and satisfaction was significant (t=-2.4, p=.016). For positive emotions, high-satisfaction dyads showed higher levels of synchrony, but this did not reach significance; both groups show some synchrony in positivity.

Perhaps most interesting is that low- and high-satisfaction dyads show different dynamics in their patterns of validation (i.e., conveying an understanding of the others’ point of view). Low-satisfaction dyads showed lower validation, but this was in a distinct direction: when parents displayed validation, adolescents were less likely to reciprocate compared with high-satisfaction dyads. On the other hand, high-satisfaction dyads showed strong turn-taking dynamics (t=2.92, p=.003).

Results are consistent with a view that timing in parent-child emotional communication is important (Harrist et al., 2006). However, much past work has highlighted strongly synchronous patterns of interaction, whereas our exploratory analysis suggests that subtle differences in interactional timing, such as in turn-taking patterns, may be more diagnostic of positive interactions during adolescence.