Social Skills, Family Conflict, and Loneliness in Families
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The primary aim of this study was to examine associations between family conflict, social skills, and loneliness among a sample of 255 father–mother–adult child triads. We examined two dimensions of social skills, self-disclosure skills and positive relations with others, as moderators of the association between family environment conflict and loneliness using triadic models in SAS PROC MIXED. Self-disclosure skills moderated the association between family conflict and loneliness; however, positive relations with others did not moderate this association. Thus, our hypothesis was partially supported. Implications for taking a multidimensional view to examining social skills in conjunction with family conflict and loneliness are discussed.

Keywords: Family Conflict; Loneliness; Social Skills

Social skills are central to relational processes and individuals’ well-being. Whereas individuals with good social skills typically have positive relational experiences (Burleson & Samter, 1996), those with poor social skills often experience negative relational outcomes (Segrin & Flora, 2000). Compared to socially skilled individuals, people with poor social skills are vulnerable to developing psychosocial problems, such as loneliness, when they experience stress (Segrin & Flora, 2000; Ward, Sylva, & Gresham, 2010). In other words, individuals with social skills deficits are less adept at coping with and managing stressful circumstances such as conflict, making them more likely to experience feelings of loneliness as a result. Although these associations are fairly well established in the literature, extant research primarily highlights these
associations at the individual level, whereas this study examines the associations between social skills, family conflict, and loneliness at the family level (i.e., among fathers, mothers, and adult children). Examining the extent to which social skills and family conflict are associated with loneliness in families is significant given the deleterious emotional, physical, and social consequences associated with loneliness (e.g., Cacioppo et al., 2002; Sorkin, Rook, & Lu, 2002).

Loneliness in Families

Several lines of evidence indicate that the family is an important context for the study of loneliness. First, one of the principal causes of loneliness is a deficit in social skills (Jones, Hobbs, & Hockenbury, 1982; Segrin, 1998). As we show in the following section, the family is the primary context in which young people learn and practice their social skills. Second, there is now evidence to show that loneliness is somewhat heritable (Distel et al., 2010). Research on the heritable components of loneliness has indicated that anywhere between 37% and 48% of the variance in loneliness is explainable by genetic factors (e.g., Boomsma, Cacioppo, Muthén, Asparouhov, & Clark, 2007; Distel et al., 2010). Finally, the nature of the family of origin environment (e.g., conflict, open communication, emotional bonding) is a significant predictor of family members’ loneliness (e.g., Feeney, 2006; Uruk & Demir, 2003). The family environment is an arena in which family members are exposed to various communication processes and behaviors that might be associated with their feelings of loneliness.

Social Skills and Conflict in the Family Environment

One of the primary contexts in which communication skills are learned is within the family of origin (Burleson, Delia, & Applegate, 1995; Burleson & Kunkel, 2002; Peterson & Hann, 1999); therefore, families are an ideal context in which to examine social skills. Through the mechanisms of social learning (Bandura, 1986), parents serve as models within the family environment, influencing the development of their children’s social skills. That is, children learn how to interact with others by observing and imitating the ways in which their parents interact with others. Whereas children whose parents model effective social skills will likely develop good social skills, children whose parents model ineffective social skills will likely develop poor social skills. Accordingly, research suggests that young adults’ and parents’ social skills are positively correlated (Burke, Woszidlo, & Segrin, in press) and that children’s interactions with their peers closely correspond to the social skills they observed in the family of origin (Koesten, 2004; Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002).

Family communication patterns within the family of origin have also been linked to young adults’ psychosocial well-being (e.g., Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2007; Schrodt, Ledbetter, & Ohrt, 2007). One family communication pattern that might be especially detrimental to psychosocial well-being (e.g., loneliness) is conflict. It is virtually inevitable that conflict will arise at some point in every family given that family members inherently share time and resources (Sillars, Canary, & Tafoya, 2004). Although family conflict is a normative part of family communication and
is not inherently harmful, when individuals engage in conflict that includes feelings of anger or resentment (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989) or fail to effectively manage conflict (Sillars et al., 2004), it can be fairly destructive to relationships.

Managing family conflict requires effective social skills; for example, individuals who are able to constructively disclose their feelings and consider the relational implications of their communication without criticizing each other or becoming angry are likely better able to manage their family conflicts. Alternately, when individuals are unable to express their feelings without becoming angry and losing their temper, conflicts might escalate. When individuals do not have the social skills necessary to effectively manage family conflict, they are at risk for a host of negative psychosocial consequences, including loneliness (e.g., Feeney, 2006; Johnson, LaVoie, & Mahoney, 2001). The risk for developing such psychosocial problems is especially high in stressful family environments marked by excessive levels of destructive conflict.

When children and adolescents perceive family conflict as intense and mismanaged, they might experience deficient social and personal development, as well as adjustment difficulties associated with loneliness (Johnson et al., 2001). Whereas the extant research primarily examines the effects of family communication patterns and parental conflict upon young adults’ and adolescents’ well-being, the current study builds upon this research by examining the associations between destructive family conflict behaviors (i.e., family environment conflict) and loneliness within family systems (i.e., among young adults and their parents). Further, given that individuals with effective social skills might be better able to manage family conflict, the current study includes social skills as a potential moderator of the association between family environment conflict and loneliness.

The Current Study

In line with prior social skills research (e.g., Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1988), the current study takes a multidimensional approach to understanding two different aspects of social skills: self-disclosure skills and positive relations with others. Whereas self-disclosure skills are an important mechanism in social skills, the experience of positive relations with others is an expression of social skills. Including both dimensions of social skills provides a more comprehensive examination of individuals’ actual behaviors (i.e., self-disclosure) and perceptions of behaviors with regard to their interactions (i.e., relations with others).

Given that parents serve as models for their adult children’s social skills, it is possible that parents and adult children with ineffective social skills would all have difficulty managing stressful and destructive family conflict, resulting in greater loneliness among all three family members. Thus, we hypothesize that social skills will moderate the association between family environment conflict and loneliness at the family level, such that this association will be weakest for individuals with good social skills and strongest for individuals with poor social skills. Further, given that this study focuses on social skills, family environment conflict, and loneliness at the family level, this research will also examine the level of nonindependence (i.e., within-family variance) in social skills, family environment conflict, and loneliness.
Method

Participants

Participants in this investigation were 255 father–mother–adult child triads. The fathers had a mean age of 53.14 years \((SD = 5.88)\) and mothers, 51.23 years \((SD = 4.92)\). Collectively, the parent sample was 0.4\% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 2.2\% Black/African American, 2.9\% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5.9\% Hispanic/Latino, 87.5\% White, and 1.2\% other/unknown. The adult children who participated in this investigation were on average 20.58 years of age \((SD = 2.01)\), with 71\% women and 29\% men. The race/ethnicity of the adult child sample was 3\% Black/African American, 3\% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5\% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 6\% Hispanic/Latino, 85\% White, and 2\% other/unknown.

The adult children described their predominant family structure when growing up as two-parent biological (89\%), two-parent step-family (8\%), two-parent adoptive (1\%), and one parent (2\%). Ninety-one percent of adult children reported that the parents who completed the study were their biological parents. Fathers reported living with their children for a mean of 18.37 years \((SD = 3.27)\) and mothers reported living with their children for a mean of 19.09 years \((SD = 2.09)\).

Procedure

Adult child–parent triads were recruited through students attending a university located in either the Southwest or Midwestern United States. Students were offered extra credit toward their course grade in exchange for completing an online survey and for referring two parents to also complete online surveys. Interested students were instructed to choose the two parents with whom they lived the longest, and then ask these two parents if they would be willing to participate in a study. Students were then given a link that directed them to a secure Web site where they could complete the survey. At the end of the survey, students were asked for their parents’ names and e-mail addresses. Parents were then sent a link to a different survey. The triads were linked with a code number so that parents did not have to provide their own or their child’s name as part of their survey response. The parent response rate was 83\% based on students who furnished a working e-mail address for both parents (three students provided a nonworking e-mail address for one or both parents). The software used to collect student and parent survey responses recorded the start and finish time of the survey responses, and the data from two family triads were dropped because at least one member completed the survey in less than 10 minutes. A total of 255 adult child–parent triads were retained for analysis.

Measures

Social skills

Two key elements of social skills were assessed: self-disclosure skills and positive relations with others. Self-disclosure skills were assessed with the disclosure subscale of the
Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (Buhrmester et al., 1988). This eight-item measure instructed participants to rate their effectiveness with statements such as “Telling a close companion how much you appreciate and care for him or her” and “Knowing how to move a conversation with a date/acquaintance beyond superficial talk to really get to know each other.” Responses were scored on a 1 to 5 scale (1 = “I’m poor at this; I’d feel so uncomfortable and unable to handle this situation, I’d avoid it if possible” and 5 = “I’m extremely good at this; I’d feel very comfortable and could handle this situation very well”). Participants reported moderate levels of disclosure skill on average (fathers: $M = 3.21$, $SD = .78$; mothers: $M = 3.39$, $SD = .73$; and adult children $M = 3.42$, $SD = .74$). The internal consistency of the disclosure scale for each group of participants was: fathers $\alpha = .88$, mothers $\alpha = .86$, and adult children $\alpha = .84$.

Positive relations with others were evaluated using Ryff’s (1989) Positive Relations with Others scale, a subscale of Scales of Psychological Well-Being. This 14-item measure included items such as “People see me as loving and affectionate” and “I enjoy personal and mutual conversations with family members or friends.” Responses were scored on a 1 to 5 scale (1 = “Strongly disagree” and 5 = “Strongly agree”). Participants reported moderate to high positive relations with others, with mothers reporting the most positive relations with others ($M = 4.12$, $SD = .57$), followed by adult children ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .61$), and fathers ($M = 3.86$, $SD = .60$). The internal consistency for the different family members was: fathers $\alpha = .91$, mothers $\alpha = .89$, and adult children $\alpha = .89$.

**Family environment conflict**

Family environment conflict was assessed using the Conflict subscale of the Family Environment scale (FES; Moos, 1974). This nine-item measure assesses the frequency and severity of competitive and destructive conflict behaviors in family settings (e.g., “We fight a lot in our family,” “Family members rarely become openly angry” (reverse scored), “Family members often criticize each other,” and “Family members often try to one-up or outdo each other.”) Although the original questionnaire measured the absence or presence of these conflict behaviors using a true or false rating, we changed the responses to a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = “Not Characteristic or True of my Family” and 5 = “Characteristic or True of my Family”) to account for more variability in participant perceptions of family environment conflict. Participants reported relatively low levels of family environment conflict (fathers: $M = 2.17$, $SD = .61$; mothers: $M = 2.23$, $SD = .67$; and adult children: $M = 2.28$, $SD = .69$). The internal consistency for the different family members was: fathers $\alpha = .77$, mothers $\alpha = .77$, and adult children $\alpha = .81$.

**Loneliness**

Russell’s (1996) UCLA Loneliness scale was used to assess loneliness. This 20-item measure assesses loneliness without ever using the term “lonely,” and includes items
such as, “How often do you feel you lack companionship?” and “How often do you feel there are people who really understand you?” (reverse scored). These items were rated on a 4-point scale (1 = “Never” and 4 = “Always”). Participants reported low to moderate loneliness (fathers: $M = 1.82$, $SD = .45$; mothers: $M = 1.78$, $SD = .40$; and adult children: $M = 1.80$, $SD = .43$). The internal consistency across the different family members was: fathers $\alpha = .92$, mothers $\alpha = .91$, and adult children $\alpha = .91$.

Prior to testing the study’s hypotheses, all of the measures were subjected to confirmatory factor analyses to ensure that the items were loading correctly on each factor. For these measurement analyses, latent variables were specified for each of the four variables to be analyzed (i.e., self-disclosure skills, positive relations with others, family environment conflict, and loneliness). The individual items in each scale were specified as indicators of that scale. All of the latent constructs were allowed to be correlated with each other. Three such confirmatory factor analyses were conducted, one for each family member. The results for the variables measured in adult children were $\chi^2 = 2406.29$, $df = 1218$, $p = .000$, $\chi^2 / df = 1.98$, $CFI = .78$, $RMSEA = .06$. Results for the father measurement model were $\chi^2 = 2543.77$, $df = 1218$, $p = .000$, $\chi^2 / df = 2.09$, $CFI = .78$, $RMSEA = .07$. Finally, results for the mother measurement model were $\chi^2 = 2499.71$, $df = 1218$, $p = .000$, $\chi^2 / df = 2.05$, $CFI = .76$, $RMSEA = .06$. Collectively, the results of these analyses suggest that, by most indicators, the sample data conform to the factor structures of the various instruments. In other words, the items that are designed to measure loneliness, for example, load substantially on the loneliness latent construct, the items designed to measure family conflict load on the family conflict latent variable, and so on.

Data Analysis

We used SAS PROC MIXED to test two multilevel models following the steps outlined by Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006). As traditional analytic techniques assume independence of sampling from the population, a mixed model takes into consideration the fact that family members may have more similar scores to each other than if randomly sampled. That is, the variables in these models included scores from fathers, mothers, and adult children, all nested within one family score. SAS PROC MIXED allowed us to control for the interdependence among the sample participants (i.e., individual family member scores were nested in triads) by running two triadic correlated-residuals models. Loneliness was examined as the outcome variable in both models and included two different sets of predictors. The first set of predictors included self-disclosure skill, family environment conflict, and the interaction between self-disclosure skill and family environment conflict. The second set of predictors included positive relations with others, family environment conflict, and the interaction between positive relations with others and family environment conflict. Because we had more female than male adult children participants, adult child sex was included as a control in both models to account for any potential effect of adult child sex on loneliness. The REPEATED statement was used to treat the individual scores as repeated measures nested within families. We also specified the residual
structure as compound symmetry in order to force the degree of unexplained 
variance for family members to be equal (Kenny et al., 2006). All of the predictors 
in the models were treated as fixed effects.

To estimate the degree of nonindependence in loneliness and health across family 
members, three null models were analyzed using SAS PROC MIXED (Hayes, 2006) to 
estimate intraclass correlations, or the proportion of variance in a dependent variable 
that can be attributed to family membership. These models included only the family 
 grouping variable (i.e., individuals nested within families) and either self-disclosure 
skills, positive relations with others, family environment conflict, or loneliness as 
the dependent variables.

Results

We hypothesized that social skills would moderate the association between family 
environment conflict and loneliness, such that this association would be weakest 
for those with good social skills and strongest for those with poor social skills. 
Correlations among study variables are presented in Table 1, and results from the 
triadic correlated-residuals models are presented in Table 2.

The results indicated that there was a significant interaction between family 
environment conflict and self-disclosure skill, such that individuals in high conflict 
family environments reported greater loneliness with less self-disclosure skill (see 
Figure 1). This interaction was decomposed by calculating conditional slopes at vari-
able values of the moderator, as outlined by Aiken and West (1991); however, we cre-
ated interaction terms using the 10th and 90th percentile values. Aiken and West 
(1991) stated that “if Z is continuous . . . then the investigators are free to choose 
any value within the full range of Z” (p. 12) for plotting interactions. We chose these 
conditional values to provide a more complete illustration of the slopes. Both slopes 
were significant, indicating that both individuals with poor self-disclosure skills and 
individuals with better self-disclosure skills experience greater loneliness in high con-
lict family environments. The interaction between family environment conflict and 
positive relations with others was not significantly associated with loneliness; however, 
after removing the interaction from the model, results indicated that there were main 
effects of family environment conflict and positive relations with others on loneliness. 
That is, greater loneliness is associated with greater family environment conflict and

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Note. **p < .01.
less positive relations with others. Taken together, these results partially support our hypothesis.

Additionally, the results from the three null models indicated that family membership explained a significant proportion of the variance in positive relations with others (ICC = .10, *p < .05), family environment conflict (ICC = .44, **p < .001), and loneliness (ICC = .17, ***p < .001). Family membership did not explain a significant proportion of the variance in self-disclosure skills, however (ICC = .06, ns).

### Discussion

This research examined the association between family environment conflict, social skills, and loneliness among family members. As hypothesized, self-disclosure skills moderated the association between family environment conflict and loneliness, such that individuals who reported more family conflict also reported greater loneliness with poor self-disclosure skills. That is, individuals from a high conflict family environment reported greater loneliness whether they had good or poor social skills; however, individuals with poor self-disclosure skills reported greater loneliness than those with better social skills. This pattern did not emerge when positive relations with others was included as a moderator in the model instead of self-disclosure skills.
Notably, these findings suggest that self-disclosure skills influence the association between family environment conflict and loneliness at the family level (i.e., with fathers, mothers, and adult children scores nested within the family level variables). In other words, the self-disclosure skills among family members are associated in similar ways with family environment conflict and loneliness. Some research indicates that there is an inverse association between loneliness and self-disclosure among adolescents (Davis & Franzoi, 1986); however, this research does not address disclosure about family conflict in particular. It is possible that family members who perceive more destructive conflict in their family environment also feel as though they do not have the ability or the outlets to talk about the conflict within their family environment, possibly because their ineffective social skills only exacerbate the destructive conflict, which then leads to feelings of loneliness (Johnson et al., 2001).

In the model that included self-disclosure skills and family environment conflict as predictors of loneliness, family environment conflict and self-disclosure skills each explained an equivalent amount of the variance in loneliness. In contrast, within

![Figure 1: Family Level Interaction between Family Conflict Environment and Disclosure Skills as Predictors of Loneliness.](image-url)
the model that included positive relations with others and family environment conflict, positive relations with others accounted for more of the variance in loneliness. In other words, it appears as though the expression of social skills (i.e., positive relations with others) is more strongly associated with loneliness than are the mechanisms through which people express their social skills (i.e., disclosure skills).

Loneliness, by definition, indicates that individuals are lacking adequate companionship, and this inadequate companionship might explain why the positive relations with others dimension of social skills appears to be more closely aligned with feelings of loneliness. For example, people who do not perceive that they have positive relations with others most likely do not have a strong network to turn to for support during stressful times and probably have trouble marshaling support from the network that they have (Segrin & Flora, 2000). It makes sense that such individuals might report greater loneliness, either as a function of their inability to marshal support under stressful circumstances, as a function of their lacking positive interactions and companionship, or both. Future research should examine this dimension of social skills in conjunction with loneliness and support to understand more clearly the associations among these variables.

Additionally, it seems as though the family members in this sample were relatively similar regarding positive relations with others, family environment conflict, and loneliness, but were not as similar on self-disclosure skills. Given that the first three constructs are all indicative of relational elements, and self-disclosure skills is more representative of an individual action, it makes sense that the relational elements would be more similar among family members than a more individual construct.

This study adds to the literature on social skills and the family agglomeration of mental health problems in a number of ways. First, assessing four measures of interest (self-disclosure skills, positive relations with others, loneliness, and family environment conflict) for 255 triads in a triadic correlated-residuals model, allowed for a true family-level analysis (i.e., father, mother, and adult children scores were nested within family triads). Data from only one family member (e.g., young adult) would only illustrate these processes among individuals in that role (i.e., young adult child) and age range (i.e., young adulthood). Because this investigation included data from young adults and both of their parents, however, we are able to conclude that the associations among the study variables occur for three members of a family, even after controlling for the effect of family interdependence, and that they are not restricted to those in a particular family role or at a particular point in the lifespan. The family level associations in this study illustrate the significance of examining family processes within a family context.

Examining the associations among these variables at the family level also has practical implications for family researchers. The finding that self-disclosure skills moderate the association between family environment conflict and loneliness on a family level is significant because this association occurs among the members of the family as a whole. In other words, the family conflict environment has the potential to affect loneliness among all family members, especially when these family members have poor disclosure skills. Learning how to manage family conflict might be more difficult among family members with poor disclosure skills. These findings highlight the
importance of helping families to understand the importance of managing conflicts together as a whole.

Despite these strengths, this study also has limitations. First, this sample was comprised of university students and their parents. It is possible that such participants might be more well-adjusted compared to the general population. Accordingly, we should note that participants reported relatively low levels of family environment conflict and loneliness. Although we did find a significant interaction effect despite these low levels of conflict and loneliness, researchers should be more vigilant with regard to finding samples in which conflict and loneliness might be more variable in future research (e.g., a random or clinical sample).

Further, this sample of adult children primarily consisted of daughters (71%), and relatively few sons (29%). It is unlikely that this imbalance in adult child sex influenced the results, however, given that adult child sex was not a significant predictor of loneliness in either of the models. Regardless, future researchers should make a more significant effort to recruit a balanced sample of sons and daughters to get a more comprehensive representation of the family environment. Additionally, because these data are cross-sectional, it is not possible to determine the directionality of the associations that we found; therefore, conducting a similar study using a longitudinal design in future research might serve as a more appropriate avenue for making causal inferences. Whereas this research focused on destructive family environment conflict, future research should take a more multidimensional approach to examining conflict in families. Nevertheless, this research illustrates the important role of social skills, particularly self-disclosure skills, in minimizing psychosocial distress when otherwise exposed to stressful family conflict environments.

References


