Interparental Conflict and Children of Discord and Divorce

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Data on the relation between marital turmoil (i.e., discord and divorce) and behavior problems in children are reviewed. It is concluded that a relation between the two domains does exist. Several parameters of this relation are outlined, including type of marital turmoil, form of the child's behavioral response, sex differences, age effects, parental buffering, and effects of parental psychopathology. Conclusions drawn from this review are used to evaluate several broad etiological hypotheses about the effect of marital turmoil on children, and implications for the treatment of behavior problems in children from these families are discussed. Finally, interpretative and methodological refinements are suggested for future research.

The idea that marital turmoil is the cause of a variety of behavior problems in children is widely held both in the public and in the professional domain. During the first 6 months of 1980, such prominent media as Newsweek and the New York Times Magazine ran cover stories on children of divorce, and the National Institute of Mental Health solicited research proposals on the topic. Recent interest has been spurred by popular movies and books, which themselves reflect the turmoil found in an increasing number of American families. In fact, the Academy Award winner for best motion picture in 1980 depicted the problems of marital separation and child custody (Kramer vs. Kramer), and the 1981 winner portrayed family conflict in a two-parent household (Ordinary People).

It has been estimated that 38% of the first marriages of women in their late twenties will end in divorce (Glick & Norton, 1978). Although divorce is slightly less frequent among couples who have children under 5 years of age, an estimated 45% of the children born in 1977 will live in a one-parent family for at least several months, primarily as a result of divorce (Cherlin, 1977; Glick & Norton, 1978). The census bureau has reported a 79% increase in the number of single-parent families between 1970 and 1980, so the current prevalence is one in five (U.S. Census Bureau, 1980). Because not every discordant marriage is dissolved, these astronomical figures on the number of children of divorce omit a significant and largely unknown number of children who are exposed to serious marital conflict.

Psychologists have been called on to provide both explanations and treatments for families who are affected by marital turmoil. The response has encompassed almost the entire range of possibilities. Some psychologists have suggested that whenever there is a problem child, there is a problem marriage (Framo, 1975); others have concluded that a relation between divorce and child problems has yet to be demonstrated (Herzog & Sudia, 1973). The relative lack of sophisticated research regarding the relation between marital turmoil and child problems encourages such a diversity of opinion. Nev-

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1 The term turmoil refers to families characterized by discord in marriage, separation, or divorce as a group. The term marital problems is occasionally used as a synonym. Interparental conflict is used to denote open hostility between married, separated, or divorced parents. Marital discord refers to problems in intact marriages only.
Covariation Between Marital and Child Problems

A number of investigators have found a relation between discord in intact marriages and the severity or frequency of behavior problems in children. This finding remains consistent across such countries as the United States (Emery & O'Leary, in press; Oltmanns, Broderick, & O'Leary, 1977; Porter & O'Leary, 1980), England (Rutter, 1971, 1979), and India (Chawla & Gup, 1979). Similarly, divorce and child problems have often been found to be related (Anthony, 1974; Hetherington, 1979; McDermott, 1968, 1970; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Westman, Cline, Swift, & Kramer, 1970). Many studies of marital and child problems, however, suffer from one or more of a variety of methodological flaws. The three most common problems are (a) biased sampling—usually from a clinic population; (b) non-independent data—that is, the same judges rate both the marriage and the child, or, in the case of divorce, the judges of child behavior are aware of the marital status; and (c) the use of measures lacking in reliability and validity. Each of these problems may affect estimates of the magnitude of the association between marital and child problems.

Stronger associations between marital discord and child adjustment seem to be found in clinic rather than in nonclinic samples (O'Leary & Emery, in press). In a series of studies by the Stony Brook group, all of which used parents' ratings on well-established measures of child behavior (Behavior Problem Checklist, Quay & Peterson, Note 1) and marital adjustment (Short Marital Adjustment Test, Locke & Wallace, 1959), stronger associations were found in clinic (Emery & O'Leary, in press; Oltmanns et al., 1977; Porter & O'Leary, 1980) than in nonclinic samples (Oltmanns et al., 1977; Emery, Note 2). Significant relations were found in both sets of samples; the clinic samples, however, may have differed from the nonclinic ones on some third variable that increased estimates of the association between marital and child problems (O'Leary & Emery, in press).

Some data suggest that the expectation bias2 (Rosenthal, 1966) of raters of child behavior who are not blind to the marital relationship can also lead to higher estimates of the relation between marital and child problems. Robinson and Anderson (Note 3) found that a significant correlation between mothers' checklist ratings of their marriage and their children's adjustment was reduced to a chance level when social desirability was partialled out. Emery (Note 2) found stronger correlations between mothers' marital ratings and their own judgments of disturbance in their children than between mothers' marital ratings and teachers' child adjustment scores. Because mothers and teachers rate behavior in different settings, however, situation-specific behavior could explain this result. In fact, one might expect child behavior to be most affected in the setting where the marital turmoil is present. Thus, independent measures of marital discord and child problems in the home setting may be exceedingly difficult, but important, to obtain.

Unlike the effects of using clinic samples and nonindependent ratings, the use of unreliable measures would tend to attenuate rather than increase estimates of the magnitude of the association between marital and child problems. Researchers are not fully satisfied with the reliability and validity of the available measures of either childhood adjustment (Achenbach, 1978) or marital relations (O'Leary & Turkewitz, 1978). It is not surprising, then, that many of the reports reviewed below used measures of ques-

2 The expectation—held by parents, teachers, and mental health professionals—that marital turmoil causes behavior problems in children not only may create biased rating data but also may be problematic in that a self-fulfilling prophecy may result. For example, parents who attribute a child's (normal) misbehavior to an emotional reaction to marital turmoil may not respond to that child with their usual discipline. Thus, in their attempt to understand the child, some parents may set limits that are inconsistent and confusing and thereby accidentally create the problems that they are trying to avoid.
tionable adequacy. Unreliability is especially important to consider when comparing correlations between a given measure and several other measures of different reliabilities. In this case, differences between the correlations that appear to be substantive may, in fact, only reflect error variance.

Given the above concerns, one could choose to attend to only the very small number of reports that contain none of these problems. This option was rejected in the present review for four reasons. First, the topic poses important questions that must be answered by clinicians on the basis of existing data. It seems worthwhile, therefore, to attend to whatever evidence is available, albeit with appropriate caution toward methodological limitations. Second, close inspection of the data across studies often reveals a convergence of results from studies containing different flaws. It is unlikely, though possible, that different flaws would consistently lead to similar erroneous conclusions. Third, some of the results that may be attributable to methodological differences are of interest in their own right. For example, the difference between clinic and nonclinic samples is an intriguing one. Finally, in those few studies that contain none of the three problems, marital and child problems are related. That is, researchers who used well-established measures while studying intact, nonclinic families have found that teachers' ratings of children's behavioral adjustment were related to independently obtained parental reports of discord (Block, Block, & Morrison, 1981; Emery, Weintraub, & Neale, in press; Rutter, 1971; Emery, Note 2). Similarly, divorce and child adjustment problems have been found to be related in nonclinical samples where child behavior was indexed by such independent measures as behavioral observation, teacher ratings, and peer nominations (Hetherington, 1972; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978). Thus, although methodology can affect estimates of the magnitude of the relation between marital and child problems, the relation is nevertheless a real and important one. One can be confident that the results of investigations that used weaker methods are not wholly attributable to methodological third variables.

Pathogenic Dimensions of Marital Turmoil

A necessary step in further specifying the covariation between marital and child problems is to define marital turmoil and child behavior problems more precisely. This task, however, is extremely difficult. Neither the field of abnormal child psychology (Achenbach, 1978) nor the study of marital relations (Gurman & Kniskern, 1978; O'Leary & Turkewitz, 1978) has produced a widely accepted classification system. The present review takes a cautious approach to child adjustment by limiting discussions primarily to two broad and well-accepted dimensions of child disturbance: problems of overcontrol (e.g., anxiety, withdrawal) and problems of undercontrol (e.g., aggression, conduct disorders; Achenbach & Edelbroch, 1978). More specific problems, as identified by various investigators, are occasionally mentioned. It also should be made clear that this review is concerned only with children's social behavior that is considered by parents, teachers, or mental health professionals to be maladaptive. Important factors such as cognitive development and adjustment during adult life are not reviewed here.

A definition of marital turmoil is more difficult to construct. A movement toward specificity has occurred among divorce researchers who originally studied single-parent families (grouping the divorced, widowed, and unmarried together), then focused on divorce in particular, and now increasingly recognize the importance of studying the conflict between divorced or divorcing parents (Levitin, 1979). Unfortunately, how one best defines and measures conflict, in intact or in broken families, is a matter of controversy. Three theoretically relevant aspects of the definition are the process of conflict (e.g., hitting, arguing, avoidance), its content (e.g., sex, child rearing, money), and the length of time it lasts.

The ideal system, therefore, would evaluate families in terms of two discrete categories: family structure (divorced, separated, intact) and content of conflict. It would also provide magnitude estimates along two continua representing the length and the process (from openly hostile to calm) of conflict.
within each content category. Except, however, for the structural divorced/intact distinction, which is preserved throughout the present review, researchers have neither precisely nor uniformly measured marital turmoil. This is unfortunate. Particular content, process, and temporal aspects of conflict appear to have more detrimental effects on children than do other aspects.

Separation From a Parent Versus Interparental Conflict

A critical question is whether separation from a parent per se or the interparental conflict that is concomitant with divorce is more strongly related to child behavior problems. This distinction is particularly relevant because it bears on such issues as whether parents should stay together for the children's sake. The association between divorce and behavior problems in children has been interpreted as evidence that separation per se has a direct and substantial negative effect on the child, regardless of the circumstances surrounding the separation (Bowlby, 1973). This interpretation has met with popular support; thus, beliefs about the negative effects of a broken home are widely held.

Recent reviews suggest that this causal hypothesis has failed to consider adequately the effects of interparental conflict (Rutter, 1971, 1979). Current evidence suggests that interparental conflict, not separation, may be the principal explanation for the association found between divorce and continuing childhood problems. Five different research approaches support this conclusion. First, several investigators have compared children from homes broken by divorce or separation with those from homes broken by death. More behavior problems were found in homes broken by divorce, suggesting that something other than separation per se is having a significant effect on these children (Douglas, Ross, Hammond, & Mulligan, 1966; Gibson, 1969; Gregory, 1965). Second, other researchers have found that children from broken but conflict-free homes were less likely to have problems than were children from conflicual, unbroken homes (Gibson, 1969; McCord, J., McCord, W., & Thurber, 1962; Nye, 1957; Power, Ash, Schoenberg, & Sorey, 1974). Third, as noted throughout this review, children's responses to divorce and discord share many features. That is, undercontrolled behavior, sex differences, and buffering effects are commonly found among the children of both discord and divorce. Fourth, children of divorced parents who continue to have conflicts beyond the divorce have more problems than do children from conflict-free divorces as shown both by clinical impressions (Anthony, 1974; Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976) and by research results (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1976; Jacobson, 1978; Westman et al., 1970). Finally, one longitudinal investigation found that many of the problems evident in children from broken homes were present well before the children were separated from a parent (Lambert, Essen, & Head, 1977).

In sum, in studies of clinic and nonclinic groups that have used both independent and nonindependent raters, interparental conflict has been associated with behavior problems in children whether that conflict occurred in intact marriages, before a divorce, or after a divorce. Thus, considerable evidence supports Hetherington's observation that children from broken or intact homes characterized by interparental conflict are at a greater risk than arc children from broken or intact homes that are relatively harmonious (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1979).

Separation and Life-Change Responses

Although such data argue against attributing the association between divorce and child behavior disorders solely to separation from a parent, there is no suggestion that separation has no effect on the child. An "acute distress syndrome" is commonly found in children on separation from a parent (Bowlby, 1973; Rutter, 1979). This reaction follows a three-stage process of acute upset followed by apathy or depression, and, finally, loss of interest in the parents (Bowlby, 1973) or adaptation to the new situation (Rutter, 1972).

Awareness of the acute distress syndrome is important to the understanding of children from homes where a parent is leaving or has
recently left. Children's separation responses in reaction to divorce need to be documented, as do the effects of variations in the treatment of the children of divorce that may affect separation responses (e.g., visitation patterns, different custody arrangements). Still, there are two further reasons why the effects of separation per se appear to be less important than the results of the concomitant conflict. First, as suggested by the three-stage model and according to the impressions of clinicians and researchers, the separation effects appear to be time-limited (Anthony, 1974; Hetherington, 1979), whereas conflict responses may be more enduring (Hetherington et al., 1978). Second, even those behavioral changes found following conflict-free divorce cannot be wholly attributed to separation per se (Rutter, 1979). Significant life changes occur concomitantly with divorce and further complicate inferences about the effects of separation per se (Hetherington, 1979; Kurdek, 1981). These include sometimes dramatic changes in financial status (Herzog & Sudia, 1973) and altered discipline practices (Hetherington et al., 1976).

In sum, it must be recognized that parental conflict does not terminate with the marriage, and it may, in fact, increase after divorce. Thus, much of the association between divorce and ongoing child behavior problems may be explained by a frequently overlooked third variable, namely, interparental conflict. As indicated later, the "conflict responses" found among the children of divorce have features in common with the responses of children from discordant, intact marriages. The two areas of investigation, however, are treated separately insofar as children can have at least three sets of reactions to divorce: conflict responses, separation responses, and life-change responses associated with the new single-parent family. Although the latter two types of responses are important, children's conflict responses in both broken and intact families are the present concern.

Amount and Type of Conflict

Both the amount and type of interparental conflict to which the child is exposed would seem to be important determinants of the effect of that conflict on the child. Conflict that is openly hostile exposes the child to more, presumably pathogenic, parental interactions, as does conflict that lasts for a long period of time. The few studies that have investigated these variables are in agreement with this conjecture. Rutter et al. (1974), using interview ratings, found a stronger relation between child problems and unhappy marriages characterized by quarrelsomeness than between child problems and unhappy marriages characterized by apathy. Similarly, Porter and O'Leary (1980) found that a self-report measure of open marital conflict was a superior predictor of problems in children when compared with a general index of marital satisfaction. Finally, in a study of the effects of divorce, Hetherington (Note 4) found that encapsulated conflict was more weakly associated with child behavior problems than was open hostility. It should be noted, however, that although these results are high in face validity, the first two studies were flawed in that data were obtained from a single source (i.e., parents). Further documentation of the effects of open conflict would therefore be useful.

Evidence also supports the presumption of the increasingly detrimental effects of continuing conflict. Rutter (1980) studied children who were separated from their homes at an early age as a result of family discord or distress. He found that the children who later resided in harmonious homes were at a decreased risk for emotional disturbance when compared with their earlier status. On the other hand, those children who stayed in homes characterized by conflict continued to show problem behavior. Studies of divorce are consistent with this finding. When there is postdivorce turbulence between parents, children have more problems and more frequently come to the attention of professionals (Hetherington et al., 1976; Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976; Westman et al., 1970). Because most children of divorce are exposed to some unknown amount of predivorce conflict, these data suggest that the termination of conflict, as opposed to its continuation or exacerbation, is to the children's benefit.
The effects of both the amount and type of conflict merit more detailed investigation because all marriages have some periods of conflict. Further study of these two variables could provide valuable information on how best to handle normal interparental disagreements (in intact and in broken marriages) and on when professional help should be sought.

To summarize, the following can be concluded about the dimensions of marital relations relevant to children's adjustment: The distinction between divorced and intact families is important because separation and life-change responses are adaptations that are unique to the children of divorce. On the other hand, children of both divorce and discord are likely to show conflict responses. In an assessment of the effects of interparental conflict, distinctions along hostile–calm and temporal continua and across various content areas appear to be important. Unfortunately, such distinctions have not been made consistently in past research. In fact, the reader should be alerted that, unless otherwise noted, the studies reviewed below used summary measures of conflict or discord. These consist either of global judgments provided by a parent or an interviewer or of rating scales that sum ratings of various content and process aspects of marital relations.

Additional Parameters of the Association Between Marital and Child Problems

A review of the research literature reveals additional variables that more precisely specify the relation between marital turmoil and child behavior problems. These variables are (a) form of the child's behavioral response, (b) sex effects, (c) age effects, (d) effects of having a good relationship with one parent, and (e) effects of parental psychopathology.

Form of the Child Problem

It has been suggested that discord in intact marriages is related to children's disorders of undercontrol but not to their disorders of overcontrol (Rutter, 1971). Most of the early investigations of marital turmoil and problem children focused on relations with delinquency and found a substantial covariation (e.g., McCord & McCord, 1959). Subsequent investigations, which have included measures of other child behavior, have provided mixed results.

In studies of divorce, Tuckman and Regan (1966) found that clinic children from homes broken by divorce or separation were apt to have conduct problems, whereas children from intact families or homes broken by death had more anxiety-related problems. McDermott (1968, 1970) reported that conduct problems were most prevalent in his divorce sample, but he also found signs of depression in these children. Whereas the above two studies were based on nonindependent, clinical impressions, a study by Hetherington et al. (1978) showed that nonclinic children of divorce were more dependent, disobedient, aggressive, whining, demanding, and unaffectionate than were children from intact marriages as indexed by reliable observational measures.

In studies of intact marriages, McCord et al. (1962) found that discord was related to feminine-aggressive behavior, antisocial behavior, and sex anxiety but not to abnormal fears in a nonclinic sample. In a clinic group, Pemberton and Benady (1973) found that marital discord was related to childhood aggression and encopresis but not to enuresis. Porter and O'Leary (1980) found marital discord to be related both to problems of conduct and to anxiety in clinic children, but two similar investigations found significant relations only for conduct problems (Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Oltmanns et al., 1977). Also in direct conflict, Rutter (1971; Wolkind & Rutter, 1973) found significant relations for conduct problems but not for neurotic problems in nonclinic samples, whereas another British general population report found significant relations for both conduct and neurotic problems (Whitehead, 1979). Finally, in a study that used exemplary methodology, Block et al. (1981) found that a measure of parental disagreement about child rearing was more strongly related to teachers' ratings of undercontrol of impulses than to their ratings of overcontrol of impulses in nonclinic children who were evaluated 1, 2, and 4 years after the marital index was completed.
Although these studies present a somewhat conflicting pattern of results, every investigation, whether of questionable or sound methodology, found marital turmoil to be related to some form of undercontrolled behavior. The results for overcontrol were inconsistent. The fact that undercontrol is typically rated more reliably than overcontrol (Cantwell, Russell, Mattison, & Will, 1979; Quay & Peterson, Note 1; Emery, Note 2) may partially account for this difference. Still, it seems safe to conclude that interparental conflict—in broken and in intact families—appears to be related more strongly to children's problems of undercontrol than of overcontrol.

**Different Effects on Boys and Girls**

Considerable recent evidence suggests that marital turmoil has a greater effect on boys than on girls from both divorced (Cadoret & Cain, 1980; Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1978; McDermott, 1968; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) and intact, discordant marriages (Block et al., 1981; Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Porter & O'Leary, 1980; Rutter, 1971; Wolkind & Rutter, 1973). Nevertheless, a careful examination of the literature suggests that one must consider a number of factors when interpreting this finding.

On the basis of data obtained in interviews with nonclinic families, Rutter (1971) found that discord in intact marriages was associated with school problems in boys but not in girls. Whitehead (1979) questioned this result. Citing Becker's (1964) work documenting that parental punitiveness was related only to boys' behavior in school but to both boys' and girls' behavior at home, Whitehead argued that the relation with marital turmoil was obscured because girls inhibit aggression in school. She presented data from a nonclinic sample showing significant associations between mothers' reports of the marriage and both boys' and girls' problems at home. The results reported by other investigators (Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Porter & O'Leary, 1980), however, are contrary to Whitehead's. In samples of clinic children, significant relations were found between parents' ratings of marital discord and their ratings of behavior problems at home for boys, whereas no significant relations were found for girls. Similarly, Gassner and Murray (1969) reported finding a greater difference in the degree of observed parental conflict between groups of clinic and nonclinic boys than between similar groups of girls.

A factor that affects the sex difference more than the setting may be the type of sample used. In nonclinic samples of intact marriages, problems in both boys and girls have been found to be related to discord (Block et al., 1981; Whitehead, 1979; Emery, Note 2), whereas in clinic samples, relations have been found only for boys (Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Porter & O'Leary, 1980). When it is noted that Rutter's (1971) nonclinic sample was preselected to contain a high proportion of disturbed children and children of parents with individual psychopathology—thus making it comparable in many ways to a clinic group—this study, too, is consistent with the clinic/nonclinic sex differences.

How is this pattern of results to be explained? An examination of how each sex may respond to marital turmoil may hold an answer. Two nonclinic studies of intact marriages (Block et al., 1981; Whitehead, 1979) and one of divorce (Hess & Camara, 1979) found marital turmoil to be related directly to measures of undercontrol only for boys, whereas in clinic samples, relations were found only for boys (Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Porter & O'Leary, 1980). When it is noted that Rutter's (1971) nonclinic sample was preselected to contain a high proportion of disturbed children and children of parents with individual psychopathology—thus making it comparable in many ways to a clinic group—this study, too, is consistent with the clinic/nonclinic sex differences.

A further complication exists in interpreting sex differences among the children of divorce. These differences appear to be a result of at least a two-fold process. First,
as in studies of conflict in intact families, differences between the sexes in terms of conflict responses are expected. In addition, there may be a second effect related to being in the custody of the opposite-sex parent. Santrock and Warshak (1979), in a study that used observational and self-report measures of a nonclinic sample, found that both boys and girls of divorce had more behavior problems when the opposite-sex parent had custody than when the same-sex parent had custody. Because divorced mothers currently have child custody over 90% of the time (Glick, 1979), boys would be expected to have more postdivorce adjustment problems than would girls. Thus, it appears that boys whose parents divorce and whose mothers have custody have a dual risk for developing behavior problems.

In sum, it can be concluded that marital turmoil, in several studies of adequate methodology, is more strongly related to boys' than to girls' obviously maladaptive behavior. One needs to consider, however, setting effects, sampling, form of the response, and custody arrangements in interpreting sex differences. Further, it is possible that the effects on girls may be delayed and, as was found in one study, appear prominently in subsequent relations with the opposite sex (Hetherington, 1972). Girls are likely to be just as troubled by marital turmoil as boys are, but they may demonstrate their feelings in a manner that is more appropriate to their sex role, namely, by becoming anxious, withdrawn, or perhaps very well behaved.

Child's Age

Various arguments suggest that either older or younger children should be more affected by marital turmoil. For example, it could be argued that younger children are more susceptible because of their greater dependence on their parents. Children as young as 1 year old have been shown to respond to interparental conflict with upset and anger (Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1981). On the other hand, older children are more sensitive to emotion and may feel pressure to become involved in interparental conflict, thus making themselves more vulnerable to its effects.

Although such speculations are common, surprisingly little evidence is available on differential age effects. Two investigations of discord in intact marriages that controlled for age found no major effect (Porter & O'Leary, 1980; Rutter, Graham, Chadwick, & Yule, 1976). These studies, however, obtained nonindependent data and were limited to children 6 years of age or older. Wallerstein and Kelly (1974, 1975; Kelly & Wallerstein, 1975, 1976), in contrast, suggested that divorce has unique effects on children of different ages, from 2 years to adolescence. Their results were based solely on clinical impressions and small samples, however, and therefore cannot be viewed as reliable. Further, although these investigators reported subtly different effects at different ages, all age groups were found to be affected substantially by divorce.

Results from studies examining the effects of a child's age at the time of divorce have been inconsistent. Findings that suggest more detrimental effects of separations occurring before the age of five or six (Hetherington, 1972), after this age (Gibson, 1969; McCord et al., 1962), and no effect of age at the time of separation (Power et al., 1974), have all been reported. Thus, it has not been demonstrated that a child's age is an important determinant of the effects of marital turmoil. Nevertheless, age continues to be of interest and merits careful consideration in future investigations.

Good Parent–Child Relationships

Some recent empirical investigations have supported the clinical impression that the parent–child relationship deteriorates as a result of marital turmoil (Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1979; Rutter, 1971). None of these investigators, however, suggest that deterioration is inevitable, and, in fact, it is argued that a good relationship with one parent can “buffer” the child from some of the negative effects of marital turmoil (Hetherington et al., 1979).

In a study of intact, nonclinic families, Rutter (1971) reported that a good relationship with at least one parent significantly reduced the likelihood that boys would be judged antisocial by their teachers. It is
worth noting, however, that boys from discordant marriages still had more problems than did boys from happy marriages, despite the good parent–child relationship. Further, a good parent–child relationship was strictly defined as consisting of both positive warmth and lack of negative feelings as determined by parental interview.

Similarly, only particularly good parent–child relationships produced buffering effects in a study of children of divorce (Hetherington et al., 1979). Children's adjustment, as measured by multiple methods, was better only when, based on several parenting indices, the parent–child relationship was classified as very good. Relationships judged to be moderate had no buffering effect. Further, the very good relationship had to be with the mother. Positive father–child relationships did not mitigate the detrimental effects of marital turmoil.

In another nonclinic study of divorce, Hess and Camara (1979) also found that measures of the quality of the parent–child relationship were important predictors of child adjustment as indexed by multiple independent measures. In fact, statistical analysis revealed that parent–child relations predicted a greater proportion of the variance in child adjustment than did interparental conflict. As with Rutter's (1971) study, however, conflict was related to children's adjustment even when there was a good parent–child relationship. Finally, in contrast to Hetherington's findings, good relationships with either parent appeared to have a buffering effect.

In sum, there is emerging evidence based on adequate methodology that a particularly warm relationship with at least one parent can mitigate, but not eliminate, the effects of marital turmoil on children. Without doubt, the quality of parent–child relationships deserves further attention in studies of both discord and divorce.

Individual Parental Psychopathology

It is well documented that children from families where a parent has a psychological disturbance are at an increased risk for a variety of behavioral problems (Mednick & McNeil, 1968). Further, disordered individuals are more likely to have discordant marriages and to divorce (Molholm & Dinitz, 1972); thus, it is possible that marital turmoil may partially explain the increased problems among the children of these individuals.

Data supporting this possibility come from Rutter (1971). He found that discord in intact marriages was related to antisocial behavior in the children both of normal parents and of parents with a personality disorder. On the other hand, when the marriage was harmonious, there was no increased antisocial behavior associated with parental personality disturbance. There was, however, a trend toward an even greater risk for antisocial problems when both discord and personality disturbance were present.

Emery et al. (in press) reported similar findings among the children of parents with other diagnoses. In intact marriages discord explained most of the association between parents' affective disorder (unipolar depression or bipolar disorder) and children's disturbed school behavior. When the effect of marital discord was taken into account, little association was found between these disorders and children's behavior. But when the diagnosis was parental schizophrenia, marital discord did not explain the children's problems in school. In fact, little association was found between discord and child behavior problems in the schizophrenic group, perhaps because the children of schizophrenics were already disturbed for other reasons. Another possibility is that, although the global satisfaction ratings were similar, marital discord may be qualitatively different in schizophrenic families. Conflict may be reduced because one partner is acknowledged as sick.

These two reports—both based on nonclinic samples, independent raters, and reliable measures—suggest that, except in the case of schizophrenia, concomitant marital turmoil may explain a good part of the increased problems among the children of behaviorally disordered parents. Researchers need to examine more closely the dual, nonindependent effects of interparental conflict and parental psychopathology on children.
Mechanisms By Which Marital Turmoil Affects Children

Research on marital and child problems has not generally been guided by broad etiological rationales. Rather, mini-theories that offer only a few predictions or make no allowance for critical evaluation are more common. Because of such theoretical deficiencies, this review evaluates several hypotheses about how marital turmoil may produce childhood disorders: (a) disruption of attachment bonds, (b) modeling, (c) altered discipline practices, and (d) other models, including stress, taking on the symptom, and child effects.

Each hypothesis is evaluated in terms of the parameters of the relation between marital and child problems. Where appropriate, theoretical assumptions are weighed against the conclusions that (a) concomitant conflict, not separation per se, appears to be responsible for many of divorce's serious, long-term pathogenic effects; (b) openly hostile and continued conflict has a great effect; (c) the most prominent behavior disorder is a problem of undercontrol; (d) boys demonstrate a greater observable response than do girls; (e) age has not been shown to alter the child's reaction; (f) a good relationship with at least one parent can partially buffer the negative effects; and (g) increased interparental conflict may explain many of the negative effects found among children of parents with individual psychopathology. Other direct evidence is discussed where it is available and appropriate.

Attachment and Separation

One of the few detailed hypotheses about the effect of marital turmoil on children is the maternal deprivation hypothesis (Bowlby, 1969). According to this account, the loss of a figure to whom one is attached (usually the mother) produces an instinctive fear response. The survival value of the fear response accounts for its instinctive nature. Fear keeps the infant proximal to the caretaker, thus increasing the chances for survival. On the basis of this rationale, Bowlby (1973) concluded that whenever an attachment figure is lost for any reason, anxiety results.

The specificity of this hypothesis makes it easily testable, but theoretical assumptions in relation to marital turmoil may have been overstated. The strongest prediction from the attachment hypothesis is that divorce—because it involves separation from a parent—has a direct, negative effect on the child. Although separation responses have clearly been demonstrated, evidence reviewed earlier suggests that concomitant interparental conflict, rather than separation per se, is the more salient factor in creating behavior problems in the children of divorce. Further, the hypothesis predicts that maternal deprivation is the most damaging because the mother is most commonly the primary attachment figure. Divorce usually results in paternal deprivation, thus the hypothesized effects on these children are unclear.

Other parameters discussed earlier are also in conflict with the attachment hypothesis. Separations before the age of five are predicted to be the most damaging (Bowlby, 1973), but no consistent effects of age at the time of divorce were found. Problems demonstrated in the animal literature as resulting from maternal deprivation are frequently related to fears and poor social development (Rutter, 1972), yet marital turmoil was found to be most strongly associated with conduct disorders. Finally, sex differences are not explicitly predicted by the theory.

Variations on the attachment hypothesis (e.g., Goldstein, Freud, & Solnit, 1973) have suggested that loss of love (emotional deprivation) may be the central cause of problems. In support of this hypothesis, some studies comparing clinic and nonclinic families found that parents of clinic children were more negative with their children (Bugental, Love, & Kaswan, 1972; Lobitz & Johnson, 1975a; Love & Kaswan, 1974). Further, review of the buffering effect suggested that a good parent-child relationship may lessen the detrimental effect of marital turmoil.

Nevertheless, it is unclear whether loss of love accounts for these findings or whether some other aspect of the parent-child rela-
relationship produces the effect. Some direct evidence supports the latter alternative. Using a measure of felt acceptance rated by the child (Schaefer, 1965), Emery and O'Leary (1982), in a clinic sample, found that children's perceptions of being accepted by their parents were not significantly related to parental ratings of satisfaction with their intact marriages. Further, although the children were generally aware of marital discord, their ratings of felt acceptance did not correlate significantly with their own ratings of parental discord. Thus, marital discord had little direct effect on the children's feelings of being loved, perhaps because parents were particularly concerned about this possibility and explicitly guarded against it.

In sum, although it is unlikely that deprivation from a parent's love is the principal explanation for the association between marital turmoil and ongoing behavior problems in children, the attachment hypothesis has made a valuable contribution in identifying the acute distress syndrome. Researchers would do well to attempt to identify more fully separation responses in the children of divorce. This could lead to distinguishing children's reactions to the children's feelings of being loved, perhaps because parents were particularly concerned about this possibility and explicitly guarded against it.

Before we leave the topic of attachment and separation, two additional points should be made. First, although loss of love is probably not the primary mediating variable between marital and child problems, it does account for important variance in explaining behavior problems of childhood (e.g., Armentrout, 1971; Emery & O'Leary, 1982). The attachment hypothesis therefore merits further consideration. Second, the specificity of the hypothesis has stimulated interest, offered testable predictions, and generated research that states clear objectives. The area would benefit from similarly precise hypotheses.

Modeling

Modeling is a second major etiological mechanism by which marital turmoil may affect children. Schwarz (1979) suggested that interparental conflict may interfere with imitation of the same-sex parent or may lead to rejection of both parents as models. Either process would disrupt normal socialization in that appropriate parental behavior might not be imitated, and other, more deviant, models might be found. Other modeling hypotheses are also applicable. For instance, parents in an unhappy marriage may exhibit more hostile and aggressive behavior than do happily married couples, and this behavior could be imitated by their children. Unhappy couples show more conflict than do happy couples (Jacobson & Martin, 1976; Patterson, Weiss, & Hops, 1976), and much of this behavior might occur in the presence of their children. The increase in negativity toward children that corresponds with marital turmoil (Johnson & Lobitz, 1974) could be interpreted as evidence in support of this latter hypothesis.

Considerable research on the parameters of marital turmoil is consistent with modelling hypotheses. Interparental conflict, as opposed to separation from a parent, would be expected to be related more strongly to child behavior problems. The stronger relation between interparental conflict and conduct problems is also congruent with a modelling hypothesis. Disagreements and arguments are often features of marital turmoil, and aggression is readily imitated by children (Bandura, 1973). Because the specifics of the interparental conflict and children's conduct problems may be quite different, however, research that details the correspondence between how parents express hostility and how children respond to witnessing it is needed.

Modeling explanations of the sex difference in response to marital turmoil are perhaps most interesting. The modeling literature suggests that boys are, in general, more likely to imitate aggressive behavior than are girls (Flanders, 1968). The observed sex difference in response to marital turmoil may simply be a subset of this general sex dif-
ference. An alternative modeling explanation is that fathers in an unhappy marriage are more aggressive and uncooperative and that boys imitate fathers more than girls do. There is evidence that children are more likely to imitate a same-sex model (Bandura, 1969; Margolin & Patterson, 1975). The possibility that husbands in disturbed marriages act more aggressively, whereas wives react with more anxiety and withdrawal, is readily translated into testable research.

Modeling hypotheses may also explain the sex differences in children's separation and life-change responses to different custody arrangements. Because mothers have custody in most divorces (Glick, 1979), divorce may have a more noticeable effect on boys because the male model is missing. Santrock and Warshak's (1979) finding of better adjustment when the same-sex parent has custody is congruent with the hypothesis, as is evidence suggesting that contact with adults other than the custodial parent is beneficial to the child's development (Jacobson, 1978).

Its apparent fit with data on the various parameters of marital and child problems is a strength of the modeling hypothesis. Nevertheless, modeling explanations, unlike attachment theory, typically have been offered post hoc. Further, several variations of the hypothesis offer viable etiological explanations. These variations deserve further specification and testing.

**Discipline Practices**

A third mechanism by which marital turmoil may affect children is through an alteration in discipline practices. Clinic and nonclinic parents have been differentiated on a variety of measures of discipline (Becker, Peterson, Luria, Shoemaker, & Hellmer, 1962); it is possible that marital turmoil leads to a change in the use of important discipline techniques, to the detriment of the child, or it may lead to increased inconsistency in discipline either between parents or in the practices of a single parent.

Potential discipline hypotheses are numerous because a wide range of discipline constructs have been offered. These constructs include such traditional dimensions of child rearing as warm–hostile, restrictive–permissive, and calm–anxious (Becker, 1964). In addition, reinforcement theories such as coercion (Patterson & Reid, 1970) and the positive reinforcer trap (Wahler, 1976) have been offered. An attempt to address each dimension in detail would be cumbersome; therefore, the following discussion treats discipline practices as a group.

This general approach prohibits a detailed evaluation in terms of the parameters of the relation between child and marital problems. Still, there are congruencies. Discipline is a frequent topic of argument, and disagreement about discipline in front of a child obviously produces more inconsistent discipline than when the disagreement is kept private (Hetherington et al., 1976; Rutter, 1972). Problems of conduct and aggression have frequently been related to inconsistent discipline (Becker, 1964; Becker et al., 1962; McCord, McCord, & Howard, 1961; Patterson, 1977); thus, an increased frequency of undercontrolled behavior might be expected. But insofar as these are not the only aspects of child behavior that are affected by inconsistent discipline, more specific discipline predictions need to be formulated. For example, a coercion hypothesis might predict that parents in marital turmoil become more likely to give in to a child's coercive demands.

As with modeling theory, discipline explanations of sex differences are of great interest. Several accounts are plausible. For example, evidence suggests that parents are more involved with disciplining the same-sex child than the opposite-sex child (Baumrind, 1971). If marital turmoil causes fathers to alter their discipline more radically than mothers do, a greater effect would be seen on sons. Researchers have previously been warned not to ignore the father's effect on the family (Becker, Peterson, Hellmer, Shoemaker, & Quay, 1959).

The father's role is also highlighted if one hypothesizes that sons receive more inconsistent discipline during times of marital turmoil than do girls. Research shows that sons are disciplined about equally by both parents, whereas daughters are disciplined more by their mothers (Margolin & Patterson,
If parents disagree about discipline, boys should be affected more than girls because boys are disciplined more often by both parents. For example, fathers may counteract maternal discipline of their sons but not object to the mothers' rules for their daughters. In short, sons more frequently than daughters may become the focus of interparental conflict about discipline.

Direct evidence on the relation between marital turmoil and discipline practices is rare. One sound empirical study (Hetherington et al., 1976) documented changes in postdivorce discipline. When compared with parents from intact marriages, divorced parents were found to make fewer maturity demands, have poorer communication, be less affectionate, and be more inconsistent with their children. Effects of the discipline changes were that children of divorce, especially boys, were less compliant with parental commands than were children of intact marriages. This latter finding is particularly important to the discipline hypothesis because it was also found that boys were exposed to more ineffective discipline than were girls (Hetherington et al., 1978).

Changes in discipline practices were greatest 1 year after the divorce. By the second year, differences between intact and divorced parents were less noticeable (Hetherington et al., 1976). It is not known, however, whether the changes in discipline began before or after the divorce. This is a very important distinction for questions of etiology and treatment. Still, the study demonstrated that discipline was disrupted by marital turmoil, although when the change occurred and what type of change most affected the child are important questions that have been left unanswered.

Supporting the possibility that discipline may change before a divorce, a study of intact marriages (Block et al., 1981) found that an index of parental disagreement about child rearing was related both to subsequent marital dissolution and to future undercontrol in boys' and overcontrol in girls' school behavior. Inconsistency in discipline was thus shown to be both an aspect of marital turmoil and a precursor of problems in children. Such prospective findings provide strong support for the hypothesis that inconsistent discipline is a mediating factor between marital turmoil and child behavior problems. As such, the investigation provides a model for future research.

In sum, discipline is an important influence on children and one that is altered concomitantly with marital problems. Inconsistent discipline, in particular, demands continued attention, according to the results of two well-constructed investigations.

Other Hypotheses

Three additional hypotheses—stress, taking on the symptom, and child-effects—make important contributions to understanding how marital turmoil may affect children. Because the data on these hypotheses are more limited than that on the previous hypotheses, their unique implications are presented below with less critical evaluation of each hypothesis as a whole.

Stress. Marital problems can be conceptualized simply as a stressor to which children, as well as adults, are differentially exposed. Marital disruption has been noted to have pathogenic effects on adults (Bloom, Asher, & White, 1978), and it may similarly pose problems for children in that coping with life's difficulties takes a psychological toll.

A stress hypothesis is of interest primarily in explaining the differential sex effects of marital turmoil. The simplest stress hypothesis would suggest that exposure to the stressor is different for each sex. That is, girls may be shielded from interparental conflict more than are boys (Hetherington et al., 1978).

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As an alternative, the sexes may be ex-
posed equally to interparental conflict, but girls may be less susceptible to the stressor. One such explanation is that girls are less susceptible than boys to a variety of physical stressors; therefore, they may also have a greater resistance to psychological stress (Eme, 1979; Rutter, 1970).

A second such explanation of the sex difference is suggested by a recent investigation. Male and female college students were found to be equally accurate in recognizing marital conflict, but the two sexes made different interpretations of the conflict. Specifically, when judging marital interactions that were seen as equally discordant by both sexes, college women rated the couple as more "right for each other" (Epstein, Finnegan, & Bythell, 1979). This suggests that sex-role socialization may explain the different effect on boys and girls. Although both sexes are equally aware of the discord, parental conflict may be interpreted differently by girls, who may view the same stressor as being less stressful.

A diathesis-stress model offers a final stress explanation of the sex difference. Base-rate data on childhood disorders in the United States suggest that boys are predisposed toward undercontrol, whereas girls are predisposed toward overcontrol (Ross, 1980). Given this diathesis and a marital turmoil stressor, each sex may be at risk for developing a disorder. Because undercontrol is more easily recognized and less tolerated than overcontrol, however, the finding that boys are more affected than girls by marital turmoil would be expected.

**Taking on the symptom.** The hypothesis that one member of a family becomes the focus of larger family conflicts also merits consideration. Minuchin and his colleagues (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin et al., 1975) suggested that children serve the function of distracting their parents from their own conflicts by developing a problem themselves and thus redirecting parental concerns. Children's defusion of interparental conflict by "taking on the symptom" is, therefore, a fifth etiological hypothesis.

This hypothesis offers yet another explanation of the sex differences and also might explain some data on the form of the child's behavioral response. Boys may take on the symptom of interparental conflict in the sex-role-appropriate manner of becoming aggressive, noncompliant, and so on. This very noticeable disruptiveness may indeed distract a boy's parents from their own problems. Undercontrolled behavior is more obvious than overcontrolled behavior and might facilitate the distraction.

But why wouldn't girls serve the same function? Perhaps they do, but girls' behavioral distractions might have a very different topography. Rather than being disruptive, girls may become anxious, withdrawn, or even very well behaved. Girls may actually refocus parental attention by their extreme prosocial behavior. For girls, prosocial and overcontrolled behavior is more sex-role appropriate than is undercontrolled behavior, therefore being nice or worried may serve the distraction function better. This hypothesis would explain the paradox in the Block et al. (1981) data that showed that, for girls, parental disagreement was related to overcontrol in the expected direction but was inversely related to undercontrol. At the least, a taking-on-the-symptom hypothesis suggests that prosocial or competent behavior be included as a dependent measure in studies of marital turmoil.

**Child-effects.** Instead of the assumption that marital turmoil causes problems in children, the reverse argument could be true; namely, that a deviant child places strain on a marriage. Bell and Harper's (1977) cogent arguments concerning such child-effects need to be considered. Indeed, it has been found that children can decrease marital satisfaction as indexed by such findings as (a) the decline of marital satisfaction after the birth of the first child, (b) the negative effect on a marriage as a result of rearing a handicapped child, and (c) survey data wherein parents report that their children are an added stress on their marriage (Lerner & Spanier, 1978). It is likely that a conduct problem child would similarly strain a marriage.

Despite the consideration of a child-effects alternative, the causal sequence from parent to child is probably a more important pathway. One group of researchers (Oltmanns et al., 1977) found that marital satisfaction did not increase concomitantly with
parent-rated improvement in problem children's behavior, a result contrary to a child-effects prediction. Further, from a strict child-effects position, it becomes difficult to explain why boys disrupt a marriage more or why open conflict is the principal result of a child's problem behavior. Still, as others have noted (Lerner & Spanier, 1978; Margolin, in press), the best explanation of the relation between the two areas of difficulty is reciprocal influence. Marital and child problems are best viewed as interactive: To an extent, each causes and exacerbates the other.

Summary

It is unlikely that any single hypothesis fully explains the relation between marital and child problems, yet each may prove to have merit. Parents involved in conflict with each other are probably poorer models, are more inconsistent in their discipline, and place more stress on their children. Some children probably serve to distract attention away from parental conflict, whereas others may aggravate the conflict. Attachment bonds are certainly disrupted by separation and may also be affected by conflict. These (and perhaps other) processes are likely to operate collectively in affecting the children of marital turmoil, although, in any given instance, one influence may predominate.

When the hypotheses are compared, modeling and discipline practices would seem to hold particular merit in light of the available data. Still, because most of the data have preceded specific predictions, even these two etiological accounts cannot be given strong support. This general lack of hypothesis testing is characteristic of the literature on marital and child problems and should not continue. It is hoped that the above delineation of various potential etiological mechanisms will encourage future investigators to make specific predictions based on theoretical rationales.

Implications for Treatment

Although questions of etiology are far from being answered, at least one implication of the research on marital and child problems appears to be clear: Efforts should be made to minimize children's involvement in interparental conflict. Although this may seem to be only common sense, there are therapists who argue that one must increase family-wide conflict following a "civilized" divorce as a means of allowing the members to work through their feelings (e.g., Futterman, 1980).

At the level of prevention, four suggestions can be offered. First, parents should work toward the difficult goal of keeping their children out of their angry disagreements, lest the children learn that differences are resolved by yelling, fighting, or hitting. Second, parents should attempt always to agree in front of the child about at least one important topic: discipline. Third, parents should make a special effort to maintain their individual relationship with each child, as this may partially buffer the child from the interparental conflict. Finally, more parents need to be aware that conflicts between them can have negative effects on their children. Parents need to be sensitive to how their children react to marital turmoil and to be prepared to seek outside help if these reactions are prolonged.

At the treatment level, families in which marital and child problems coexist present particularly difficult problems. This is documented both by clinical impressions (Kent & O'Leary, 1976; Patterson, Cobb, & Ray, 1973) and by research that suggests that treatment is less effective (Strain, Young, & Horowitz, 1979; Clark & Baker, Note 5). Because of this difficulty therapists need to be open to new approaches and roles. For example, the suggestion that individually oriented interventions may be less successful than treatment that takes place on the family level (e.g., Minuchin, 1974) deserves consideration. Behavioral family therapy was shown in one study (Oltmanns et al., 1977) to be effective despite the presence of marital discord. As an alternative, recent evidence suggests that the marriage rather than the entire family may be the more appropriate initial level for treatment (Margolin & Christensen, Note 6). Families with both marital and child problems were found to improve more on self-report and observational measures of the family, the mar-
riage, and the child when randomly assigned to behavioral marital therapy as opposed to family treatment (Margolin & Christensen, Note 6). Although these data are preliminary, they point out the importance of comparisons of innovative treatments.

Child and family therapists must also be willing to adopt other, nontraditional approaches. Parents who are divorced or who come from discordant marriages often do not receive the spousal support that can maintain positive efforts at child rearing (Wahler, 1980). Therapists, therefore, should consider group approaches to parent training when family and couple options are impossible. Therapists also need to take a more active role in legal decisions involving marital and child problems. For example, Haynes (1978) suggested a new role for mental health professionals as divorce mediators. Rather than resolving decisions such as child custody and visitation via the adversarial legal process, it is possible that more of these decisions can be reached with the help of an impartial mediator. The latter process would seem to offer opportunities for reducing conflict, whereas the former procedure is likely to exacerbate it.

Finally, therapists need to keep in touch with the emerging empirical literature and distinguish it from opinion. For example, contrary to popular belief, the literature reviewed here suggests that divorce may ultimately result in a less detrimental environment for a child's emotional development, at least in homes where conflict is great and where divorce will lead to a diminution of that conflict. Such an interpretation might not only benefit children from intact but continually conflicted families, but it might also relieve divorced parents' guilt over the irreversible damage they may believe they have caused their children. Further, the focus on interparental conflict underscores both parents' continued responsibility to improve relations with the former spouse for the children's sake. Nevertheless, despite the fact that divorce may sometimes be the least detrimental alternative, evidence does suggest that divorcing parents should be prepared for three unique reactions from their children: conflict responses, separation responses, and life-change responses. Parents should also know that, unfortunately, psychologists do not yet have all the answers to the many questions on how marital turmoil affects children.

Future Trends

If answers to some of the questions are to be forthcoming, much more sound research will have to be done. Given below are some interpretative and methodological considerations that will need to be addressed in addition to specific proposals for future research.

Methodological Considerations

Because marital and child problems can be studied only in a correlational design and because alternative interpretations are theoretically relevant to the topic, reverse causality and third variable interpretations need to be considered. Reverse causality was discussed earlier as the etiological model of child-effects; only third variables are considered now.

A variety of strategies are available for investigating the effects of third variables. The important point is to recognize those variables that are potential mediators. In the marital–child area, variables related to marital turmoil such as social class and parental psychopathology can be controlled for in various research designs. Indeed, it has been shown that these two variables do not fully account for the observed relation (Rutter, 1971; Rutter et al., 1974), although the financial decline experienced by one-parent families clearly produces important life-change responses in the children (Colletta, 1979; Herzog & Sudia, 1973). Other variables such as postdivorce custody arrangements, visitation patterns, and social support networks also need to be measured and controlled as relevant third variables.

One third variable mentioned earlier is worth discussing again: response bias in non-independent reports of marital and child problems. Recent investigations suggest that parents' reports of behavior problems in their children can sometimes reflect more about the parent than about the child. In one study (Griest, Wells, & Forehand, 1979),
maternal ratings of child adjustment were more strongly related to maternal depression than to the child's observed behavior. It was argued that the depression had colored the mothers' perceptions.

It is possible that a similar bias might explain some of the association found between marital turmoil and child behavior problems. One way to avoid this problem is to use independent raters or observational measures. Because parents have unique access to many aspects of their children's behavior, however, it is important to determine whether marital turmoil does alter parents' perceptions of their children. The comparison of parental report with observational measures (Griest et al., 1979), the assessment of rating biases such as social desirability (Robinson & Anderson, Note 3), and the measurement of cognitive set toward evaluating children's behavior (Messe, Stollak, Larson, & Michaels, 1979) are three methods that can be used in obtaining data on this issue.

In addition to third-variable considerations, methodological improvements are needed. The taxonomy of child and marital problems and the instruments available to measure their dimensions need to be developed further. In the assessment of children, more reliable measures of social competence and of overcontrol are especially needed. With regard to marital problems, instruments are needed that will assess the process and the length of conflict independently along different continua, within discrete categories of conflict content. While the systems of classification and measurement of child and marital problems are being refined, research should use at least one accepted measure of each problem. Measures of adequate reliability are available on the self-report of child adjustment (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1978) and marital relations (Cromwell, Olson, & Fournier, 1976) as well as on the observation of child behavior (Patterson, Ray, Shaw, & Cobb, Note 7) and marital interaction (Olson & Strauss, 1972; Hops, Wills, Patterson, & Weiss, Note 8).

The definition of the population of interest is a final methodological consideration that needs to be addressed. Most of the investigations reviewed above have studied special populations, usually children referred for therapy. Although a relation between marital and child problems is found in nonclinic samples (Block et al., 1981; Gibson, 1969; Rutter et al., 1976), stronger associations seem to be found within clinic groups (O'Leary & Emery, in press; Oltmanns et al., 1977). The study of nonclinic families would not only provide valuable epidemiological data but would also control for two important confounds. First, people who seek treatment are self-selected and represent an ill-defined subgroup of the general population. Second, the fact of being the subject of both research and treatment may have problematic reactive effects. Because it has been demonstrated that it is easier to fake bad (i.e., make the family look more disturbed than it is) than to fake good (i.e., make the family look healthier than it is; Lobitz & Johnson, 1975b), the possibility that clinic samples might wish to make their family and children look more disturbed in order to justify treatment is of most concern.

Research Directions

Although suggestions for research have been made throughout the text, four specific research proposals deserve special attention.

First, a large, cross-sectional, multi-predictor epidemiological study on a representative U.S. sample is needed. The degree of covariation between types of marital turmoil and child behavior problems has not yet been documented in sufficient detail. Marital turmoil is related to increased behavioral disturbance in children, but it cannot yet be clearly specified how great the risk is. The value of epidemiological data would be greatly augmented by including moderator variables such as the type, length, and content of interparental conflict; the age and sex of children; and the presence of psychological problems in the parents, as well as by including demographic information. Findings from such a cross-sectional analysis would yield valuable data on which children in what circumstances are at greatest risk because of a given type of marital problem.

Second, more descriptive studies using detailed and reliable self-report and obser-
vational measures are needed. Comparisons between (a) intact and broken families characterized by interparental conflict and (b) other families in terms of variables such as open conflict, child-rearing practices, affection, treatment of children of different sexes, and child behavior are needed. Data from investigations of this nature could provide tests of etiological accounts and offer descriptions that would help to develop a taxonomy of marital and family relations.

Third, and perhaps most important, prospective investigations are badly needed. Longitudinal data can provide controls for reverse causality as well as yield descriptive information on the course of children's responses to marital discord and divorce. Such critical issues as (a) the distinction of separation, life-change, and conflict responses; (b) the timing of changes in parent-child interactions resulting from changes in parent-parent interactions; (c) the effect of conflict of various types and lengths; and (d) the child's role in aggravating interparental conflict can be properly addressed only through prospective investigation. The added expense involved in gathering longitudinal data is clearly offset by its quality and importance.

Finally, studies are needed on how martial turmoil affects the outcome of traditional treatments for children as well as on the effectiveness of new treatments. Alternative treatments for study include (a) family therapy, (b) conjoint therapy for parents (from both intact and broken marriages) preceding treatment of the child, (c) teaching child management to single parents in groups, and (d) divorce mediation as an alternative to the legal, adversarial resolution of custody and visitation decisions.

Both marital and child problems are common in the United States today. Careful investigation of the relation between the problems could have broad implications for the prevention and treatment of behavior disorders in children and could allow professionals to better meet the needs of both parents and children. At present, the many children from homes where interparental conflict is a common occurrence are a high-risk population. As demonstrated by the relatively meager psychological literature, research and treatment directed at lowering this risk have not been of high priority. Given the importance and the frequency of the problems, this should not be allowed to continue.

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