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Impact of Parental Conflict and Emotional Abuse on Children and Families

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The goal of this review is to summarize empirical research conducted over the past several decades examining the impact of parental conflict and emotional abuse on children and families. Toward this goal, four different subtopics are categorized and reviewed. These include the impact of mutual couple conflict, verbal, and emotional abuse/control on children; the impact of father-perpetrated verbal and emotional abuse/control on children; the impact of mother-perpetrated verbal and emotional abuse/control on children; and the impact of partner abuse on the family system including consideration of family stress, boundaries, alliances, and family structure. A review of the literature revealed 105 empirical papers, which are referenced in tables. Overarching theoretical and conceptual frameworks proposed within the field of interparental conflict and child development are used to organize and distill the broad findings evident across these studies. Recommendations for future avenues of research are presented.

KEYWORDS: marital conflict; emotional abuse; child development; parenting; family systems

The family environment is considered a primary agent in shaping their ontogenetic development for young children. Optimal rearing environments characterized by interparental relationships that are nurturing, engaged, and responsive have been associated with positive developmental outcomes in children. In contrast, conflictual,

ONLINE TABLES: Detailed summaries of the 105 studies reviewed in this article can be found in four tables available online at http://www.springerpub.com/pa. Click on the link to the "Partner Abuse State of Knowledge Project," and go to Topic 8 in the online document.

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fractured, and unpredictable interparental relationships have been associated with altered functioning (e.g., Cicchetti & Howes, 1991; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Dunn & Davies, 2001; Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006). Children from homes characterized by interpartner discord are 5–7 times more likely to experience significant psychological problems relative to children in the general population (Cummings & Davies, 1994; McDonald & Jouriles, 1991). The public health significance of the impact of parental conflict on children is underscored by the sheer prevalence of children's exposure to parental conflict and emotional abuse. Estimates suggest that between 20% and 40% of parents who live together report significant clinical levels of distress in their relationships (Cummings & Davies, 2011), and research indicates that between 3.3–10 million children witness some form of interparental conflict annually (Carlson, 1984). Testifying to the importance of this topic for empirical research conducted by family investigators, our perusal of the literature revealed over 106 studies published on this topic since 1990. These numbers highlight the importance of cataloging and summarizing this large body of research, as is the goal of the Partner Abuse State of the Knowledge Project. As such, the goal of this article is to explore broad themes across these research studies by dividing our focus into four separate subtopics including (a) the impact of mutual couple conflict, verbal and emotional abuse/control on children; (b) the impact of father-perpetrated verbal and emotional abuse/control on children; (c) the impact of mother-perpetrated verbal and emotional abuse/control on children; and (d) the impact of partner abuse on the family system—for example, levels of stress, boundaries, alliances, and family structure.

METHODS

Our review of the literature identified 105 studies that met the criteria listed earlier. There were also 56 studies that fell under the topics and were considered but were determined to not meet criteria for inclusion. Included studies were also ones published in peer-reviewed journals that appeared in various research databases including PsychInfo, Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), and Web of Science. In addition, we used Google Scholar to search for empirical research. Criteria for inclusion in our review fell across several domains. First, we defined *partner abuse* as the assessment of interparental nonverbal and verbal indicators of anger, hostility, disengagement/withdrawal from conflict, frequency of conflict, and emotional control within interparental relationships involving children. Given Topic 11's goal of assessing research of interparental physical aggression/violence, studies examining this construct were not included. However, in the course of our literature review, it became evident that studies have collapsed both nonphysical and physical dimensions of interparental conflict in their operationalization of couple discord. So as not to exclude studies that overlapped the two topic areas, research that included assessments of both nonphysical and physical violence are included in our summary topic. Second, given our goal of reviewing studies detailing how interparental conflict impact children in the family, only studies examining child functioning as an outcome variable were included in our summary tables. Finally, we defined *children* as

participants between the ages of birth and 18 years and living with the parental figures under study for at least 1 year. We review and discuss each subtopic separately.[1]

Our hope is that summarizing the state of our knowledge concerning how interparental conflict impacts both children and the family system will help other researchers to gain a firm understanding of where the empirical research has been and how future research endeavors can move the field forward toward generating knowledge, informing public policy, and assisting in clinical intervention efforts. Thus, at the conclusion of this review, we will suggest some possible future avenues that may prove fruitful in efforts to better understand how children develop in the context of interparental conflict.

RESULTS

The Impact of Mutual Couple Conflict, Verbal, and Emotional Abuse/ Control on Children

Our first subtopic details research that has investigated how children in the family are impacted by interparental conflict and emotional abuse at the couple level of analysis. The empirical studies summarized under this subtopic have operationalized conflict and verbal and emotional abuse by examining the couple relationship itself or by collapsing mother and father assessments into a marital dyad construct. Our search of the literature revealed 82 studies conducted since 1990 examining this topic. Many conceptual models of interparental conflict share the assumption that witnessing conflict between parents is a stressful event that directly undermines children's functioning (e.g., Davies, Winter, & Cicchetti, 2006; Grych, Harold, & Miles, 2003; Johnston & Roseby, 1997). Over the past two decades, empirical research has attempted to chart the implications of living in homes characterized by parental conflict for children's development. As an organizing framework for summarizing studies within this subtopic, we use family systems conceptualizations that underscore two primary pathways by which interparental conflict and abuse may convey risk to children's development. First, the *direct pathway* hypothesis predicts that witnessing destructive interparental conflict characterized by high levels of hostility, disengagement, and parents' failure to resolve their disagreements should directly increase children's risk for developing psychological problems (e.g., Davies & Cummings, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Second, interparental discord may have an indirect effect on children through its deleterious impact on parenting. Thus, the *indirect pathway* hypothesis posits that destructive interparental conflict indirectly undermines children's functioning through its association with parenting disturbances (e.g., Sturge-Apple et al., 2006).

Direct Effect Hypothesis Research. Most studies identified in this review examined the direct impact of interparental conflict and abuse on children. In identifying the specific sources of risk for children associated with exposure to interparental conflict and abuse, we draw from the work of Cummings and colleagues who provide

a blueprint for cataloging this research. Specifically, they indentified three broad classes of conflictual interactions between parents including topic of the conflict, parental emotionality around the conflict, and specific conflict tactics or behaviors used during interpartner disputes (Cummings, 1998; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2004). Emerging evidence suggests that children's coping with interparental discord may hinge, in part, on the topic or substance of the interparental conflict. For example, some studies indicate that disagreements revolving around child-rearing and marital issues carry greater risks for children than general exposure to interparental discord or interparental conflicts about social and work issues (e.g., Cummings et al., 2004; Grych, 1998; Grych & Fincham, 1993; Jouriles et al., 1991). Additionally, interparental conflict that concerns the child has been linked to children's reports of shame and self-blame (Grych & Fincham, 1993). Furthermore, although empirical evidence is limited, some research suggests that different types and intensities of parental negative emotionality (anger, sadness, and fear; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp, & Dukewich, 2002) during conflict episodes may each have specific implications for children.

However, the bulk of the research reviewed in this article has operationalized interpartner conflict as consisting of various conflict behaviors or tactics ranging from hostility, disengagement, and withdrawal to threatening verbalizations. These studies identify a wide range of outcomes for children living in discordant homes. Specifically, interparental verbal aggression has been linked with greater depression, anxiety, and trauma symptoms (Blumenthal, Neeman, & Murphy, 1998; David, Steele, Forehand, & Armistead, 1996; Kerig, 1996, 1998); physical health problems (El-Sheikh, Harger, & Whitson, 2001); aggression (Kerig, 1998; Spillane-Grieco, 2000); and peer difficulties in children (David & Murphy, 2007). Finally, composites of interpartner verbal and physical tactics have also been highly explored in the literature. Although composited constructs do not allow for a more fine-grained analysis of specificity in linkages, they are essential to consider in terms of evidence for the importance of the research. Studies reveal that interparental verbal/physical anger has been linked with children's externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Buehler, Lange, Franck, 2007; Cui, Conger, & Lorenz, 2005; Fantuzzo et al., 1991; Katz & Gottman, 1993), social competence (Fantuzzo et al., 1991), sleep disruption (El-Sheikh, Buckhalt, Mize, & Acebo, 2006; Kelly & El-Sheikh, 2011), and dating aggression (Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004).

Much of the literature has tacitly treated interparental conflict as a unidimensional construct. However, comparisons of different modes of conflict engagement within the interparental subsystem may reveal significant differences in how interparental conflict reverberates throughout the family system. For example, a study conducted by Buehler and colleagues (1998) examining both the frequency and style of interparental conflict behaviors across two different samples offers compelling support for the importance of distinguishing among properties of partner abuse. Specifically, they report that hostile, overt conflict styles (e.g., verbal aggression and threats) were more strongly associated with internalizing and externalizing symptoms in children when compared with conflict frequency. This finding of increased risk associated with

heightened levels of verbal abuse was robust across age groups (preadolescent and early adolescence), child gender, economic condition, and religious beliefs. Moreover, marital cascade models suggest that different forms of interparental interactions may have implications for children within the family unit. According to these models, the presence of unresolved, chronic mutual spousal hostility may evolve into spousal apathy and withdrawal (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990), which then may be associated with child functioning in distinct ways. Attesting to this, a study conducted by Katz and Woodin (2002) reported greater associations between children's maladjustment and parental withdrawal/detachment during disagreements than those between maladjustment and hostile marital conflict. In line with these findings, Sturge-Apple et al. (2006) found that interparental withdrawal and not interparental hostility was associated with increases in children's externalizing, internalizing, and school adjustment difficulties over time. These studies serve to emphasize the utility of making comparisons across conflict behaviors and tactics. Future research should focus on potential differences in outcomes across conflict behaviors, because this strategy will allow for greater precision in identifying the developmental sequelae of children exposed to differing forms of interpartner conflict and abuse.

Indirect Effect Hypothesis Research. The indirect pathway hypothesis posits that destructive interparental conflict indirectly undermines children's functioning through its association with parenting disturbances. In the first link of an unfolding series of family dynamics, the primary assumption of indirect effects models is that the frustration, rumination, and emotional distress stemming from interparental conflicts disrupt parent's ability to care for their children (e.g., Erel & Burman, 1995). In turn, this diminished capacity for parenting is theorized to have a deleterious impact on children's mental health and development (e.g., Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). In supporting the first chain of the hypothesized pathways, experimental and sequential analyses of family interactions have shown that parents experience difficulty in parenting situations that follow interparental conflict (e.g., Almeida, Wethington, & Chandler, 1999). Moreover, research has also indicated that diminished parenting in the wake of interparental disputes explains at least part of the association between interparental conflict and children's adjustment (e.g., Gonzales, Pitts, Hill, & Roosa, 2001; Harold, Fincham, Osbourne, & Conger, 1997; Sturge-Apple et al., 2006).

Toward achieving greater precision in indirect effects process models, empirical endeavors have demarcated substantial diversity in the unfolding pathways between interparental conflicts, different dimensions of parenting, and children's adjustment. Parenting practices have historically been dimensionalized across two primary axes including sensitivity/warmth and behavioral control (Baumrind, 1966; Maccoby & Martin, 1983), out of which arise meaningful behaviors including warmth/sensitivity, hostility, intrusiveness, lax discipline, psychological control, and disengagement/detached behaviors. Thus, although many studies contained within our review of the literature examine dimensions of parenting in indirect process models, the most powerful tests of the meditational value of multiple parenting practices comes from the

few studies that have examined several dimensions of parenting simultaneously. The seminal study in this area was conducted by Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, and Wierson (1990), who examined three different domains of parenting including parental rejection/withdrawal, lax discipline, and psychological control in a small sample of early adolescent children. They found that the association between interparental conflict and higher levels of internalizing and externalizing behavior in children was partially explained by the increases in parental rejection/withdrawal and psychological control. Since that time, several important follow-up studies have been conducted to build on these findings by comparing maternal and paternal parenting practices (e.g., Sturge-Apple et al., 2006) and charting prospective pathways over time through the use of longitudinal designs (e.g., Gerard, Krishnakumar, & Buehler, 2006).

These effects have also held over developmental periods. A cross-sectional study with one of the largest samples to date (2,541 participants spanning ages 2–18 years) documented that interparental conflict was associated with greater parental harsh discipline, less parental involvement, and greater parent–adolescent conflict (Buehler & Gerard, 2004). These perturbations in parenting were in turn associated with children's maladjustment in both younger children (ages 2–11 years) and adolescents (ages 12–18 years). Finally, research supporting indirect path models has also been conducted in ethnically diverse and low-income samples. Work by Gonzalez and colleagues (2001) has been particularly enlightening, consistent with those reported by Buehler and Gerard (2004) cited previously. Specifically, Gonzalez and associates (2001) reported that lower levels of parental acceptance and sensitivity, as well as greater occurrence of inconsistent discipline, mediated associations between children's reports of interparental conflict and elevated depressive symptoms and conduct problems. Although the sample size in this study was small ($N = 97$), the importance of exploring these associations in multiethnic and risk samples is evident.

Taken together, the findings from these studies suggest some complexity in the pathways outlined within indirect effects models. Specifically, results from these studies suggest that the impact of interparental conflict on children through diminished parenting behaviors varies across the type of parenting behaviors examined and across the characteristics of the sample examined.

The Impact of Father-Perpetrated Verbal and Emotional Abuse/Control on Children

Although the importance of studying fathers has been underscored by family researchers (Phares, Fields, Kamboukos, & Lopez, 2005), our literature review identified only two studies specifically examining how father-perpetrated conflict with their partner is associated with child functioning. This gap is particularly compelling when juxtaposed against the ample presence of male-perpetrated abuse. In the earliest study, Sullivan, Juras, Bybee, Nguyen, and Allen (2000) examined the implications for children of having a mother who experienced psychological and physical abuse at the hands of their partner using a cross-sectional design. Findings from

this study suggest that when the perpetrator was the biological father or stepfather, children experienced lower levels of self-esteem and perceived self-worth compared to children who were abused from a non-father male in the house. The results of this study suggest differential effects for children experiencing father-perpetrated conflict compared to non-related males. The second study we identified was a 3-year longitudinal investigation conducted by Schacht, Cummings, and Davies (2009) and explored fathers' use of destructive conflict tactics with mothers in a sample of kindergarten-aged children. The authors examined how paternal destructive conflict behaviors were associated with paternal parenting, children's emotional security in the family, and children's adjustment over time. The researchers concluded that higher levels of paternal destructive conflict tactics were associated with less positive paternal parenting. In turn, fathers' diminished parenting was associated with children's insecurity in the family as well as increases in children's externalizing behaviors over time. These findings illustrate that father's destructive marital conflict tactics play an important role in their parenting, as well as in children's adjustment over time. Finally, in the most recent study to date, witnessing father-perpetrated hostility was associated with both initial levels of depression and elevated trajectories of depression over time in a sample of school-aged children (Kennedy, Bybee, Sullivan, & Greeson, 2010).

Although these two studies highlight the unique nature of male-perpetrated abuse in trajectories of children's functioning, the picture is far from complete. This glaring gap in knowledge is compounded by research suggesting that fathers have a unique and pivotal role in the development of children (e.g., Lamb, 2010).

Impact of Mother-Perpetrated Verbal and Emotional Abuse/Control on Children

Similar to Subtopic 2, our review uncovered few (only two) studies examining how maternal engagement in conflict with her partner may have an impact on child development. The first study in this area was conducted by Wentzel & Feldman (1996) on a sample of sixth-grade children. Findings revealed that when children perceived their mother as more powerful and dominant in the marital relationship, they exhibited higher levels of depressive symptoms coupled with lowered self-restraint and self-concept. Building on this research, Crockenberg, Leerkes, and Lekka (2007) examined how mother's martial aggression toward their partner during infancy was associated with their infants' development. Specifically, higher levels of maternal partner–directed aggression were associated with infant withdrawal from the parent. Thus, these studies suggest that maternal-perpetrated verbal and emotional abuse may place children at higher risk for the development of depressive symptoms. However, as indicated by the presence of only two studies examining this subject, this area of research is vastly underdeveloped.

Although they did not meet the criteria for Subtopics 2 and 3, there were several studies in Subtopic 1 that further explored differences between the impact of mothers'

and fathers' conflict and abusive behaviors on children's development, which merit some discussion. In an examination of associations between both fathers' and mothers' use of verbal aggression during interparental disputes in a sample of young children, Jenkins (2000) found greater links between fathers' verbal anger and children's taunting and aggressive behaviors in the classroom when compared to mothers. In a sample of early adolescent children, Dadds, Atkinson, Turner, Blums, and Lendich (1999) reported that fathers' use of an attacking conflict style with their partner was associated with daughters' greater internalizing symptoms. Conversely, mothers' use of attacking conflict style was positively associated with their son's internalizing symptoms. These are interesting findings that suggest cross-gender effects in the family unit. Furthermore, using a sample of older adolescents, Ferguson and Horwood (1998) found that father-perpetrated aggression is uniquely linked to adolescent conduct disorder, property offending, and anxiety disorder. In turn, mother-perpetrated aggression was associated with alcohol abuse/dependence.

Impact of Partner Abuse on the Family System—For Example, Levels of Stress, Boundaries, Alliances, and Family Structure

Family systems theory may also serve as a useful heuristic for integrating the study of partner abuse within a broader family context. According to the principle of holism in family systems theory, the meaning of any perturbation in a specific family relationship or subsystem cannot be fully deciphered without an understanding of the relationship structures, boundaries, power distributions, and communication patterns of the other family subsystems and the whole family unit (Davies & Cicchetti, 2004). Thus, a derivative assumption is that difficulty in the marriage may exert an impact on children's functioning through its association with a broader pattern of boundary maintenance difficulties (i.e., ways of exchanging resources and materials across family members) and structure in the family system. Although espoused in clinical work, consideration of the family system in research on partner abuse and conflict is less prevalent. However, we identified several empirical studies that highlight the utility of family systems considerations. Many of these studies were contained within a special issue of the journal of *Development and Psychopathology* (Davies & Cicchetti, 2004) dedicated to documenting empirical integration of family systems theory with research in child development. One study included within the issue examined children's development with respect to the whole family functioning using family typologies outlined in family systems theory. Specifically, Davies, Cummings, and Winter (2004) demonstrated that elevated interparental discord was the common denominator in two types of higher-order profiles of relationship functioning across interparental, coparental, and parent–child subsystems. More specifically, disengaged families experienced overly rigid, inflexible, and distant relationship boundaries that were manifested in high levels of family discord, hostility, and detachment across family subsystems, whereas enmeshed families exhibited weak boundaries across family subsystems and, as a result, display high levels of conflict, hostility, and psychological

control. In comparison to children from cohesive families who experienced warmth, affection, and flexible well-defined boundaries in family relationships, children from disengaged families showed greater signs of insecurity in the interparental relationship and higher levels of concurrent and subsequent internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Further examination of the deleterious effects of boundary dissolution on children's development also assists in pinpointing particular characteristics of the family environment, which may have differential implications for child development in the context of marital conflict. Specifically, Jacobvitz, Hazen, Curran, and Hitches (2004) reported that enmeshed family patterns were associated with children's depressive symptomology; controlling/disengaged family interactions predicted higher anxious and depressive symptoms in children; and family hostility forecast attention difficulties, somatization, and hyperactivity in children.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The empirical research summarized previously is an attempt to demarcate the degree and range of children's vulnerability associated with exposure to interparental conflict and discord. As such, this first generation of research has been instrumental in constructing a vast body of knowledge on the nature and magnitude of risk posed by interparental conflict to children. However, the analysis of associations between interparental conflict and child functioning has typically yielded scant information on how, when, and why children exposed to interparental conflict exhibit specific developmental outcomes over time. Thus, empirical documentation of the direct links between interparental conflict/abuse and children's psychological and behavioral functioning has, to a certain extent, reached a point of diminished returns (Fincham, 1994; Grych, Jouriles, Swank, McDonald, & Norwood, 2000). The literature is facing a critical transitional stage, and calls are increasing for a second generation of process-oriented research to (a) more precisely identify the multiple dimensions of family process in interparental conflict models, (b) elucidate the explanatory mechanisms underlying direct and indirect pathways, (c) examine possible moderating variables to determine for whom pathways may pose elevated risk or resilience, and (d) increase methodological rigor in empirical designs (e.g., Davies et al., 2006; Fincham & Grych, 2001; Grych, 2001).

First, future advances in understanding the developmental sequelae of interparental conflict will require balance and integration of research questions addressed by the first and second generation of research. As such, further progress may be achieved by refining our understanding of the nature of associations between multiple dimensions of interparental conflicts, underlying mechanisms, and forms of child maladjustment. As our review points out, scant research has simultaneously examined the different properties of the various forms of interparental conflict that are present within the family system. Given the assumption that the interparental relationship is the cornerstone of the family unit (Cowan & Cowan, 2002), different ways of expressing and managing relationships within the interparental subsystem

may have significant implications for the family system (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Cummings & Davies, 2002; Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). Understanding children's adaptations in the multidimensional constellation of destructive and constructive properties in the interparental subsystem is a key step toward the broader goal of explaining why interparental conflict and accompanying processes are associated with child adjustment problems (e.g., Davies, et al., 2006).

With respect to the examination of underlying mechanisms, several important conceptual models postulate possible explanatory variables, which may explain the increased vulnerability to psychopathology evidenced by children raised in discordant homes. These models include emotional security theory (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Davies & Sturge-Apple, 2007; Davies & Woitach, 2008), cognitive-contextual framework (Grych & Cardoza-Fernandes, 2001; Grych & Fincham, 1990), and risky family conceptualizations (e.g., Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). Correspondingly, research has delineated possible explanatory mechanisms in process models examining the impact of interparental conflict on children's adjustment and outcomes outlined in these theoretical frameworks including children's emotionality (e.g., Atkinson, Dadds, Chipuer, & Dawe, 2009; Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2006; Du Rocher Schundlich, White, Fleischhauer, & Fitzgerald, 2011), cognitive appraisals (Ablow, Measelle, Cowan, & Cowan, 2009; Gerard, Buehler, Franck, & Anderson, 2005; Grych et al., 2003; Kim, Jackson, Conrad, & Hunter, 2008), internal representations (Davies & Cummings, 1998; Davies, Forman, Rasi, & Stevens, 2002; El-Sheikh, Cummings, Kouros, Elmore-Staton, & Buckhalt, 2008; Sturge-Apple, Davies, Winter, Cummings, & Schermerhorn, 2008), behavioral regulation (e.g., Gordis, Margolin, & John, 2001), social cognition (Marcus, Lindahl, & Malik, 2001), and physiological functioning (Davies, Sturge-Apple, Cicchetti, & Cummings, 2007; El-Sheikh, 1996, 2005; Sturge-Apple, Davies, Cicchetti, & Manning, in press). Recent work has also sought to identify important neurobiological correlates of partner abuse and children's functioning. Specifically, Choi, Jeong, Rohan, Polcari, and Teicher (2009) report associations between parental verbal abuse and aberrations in children's brain structure and functioning.

These empirical accounts examining possible mediating mechanisms explaining why destructive properties of interparental conflict directly undermine children's functioning have moved the field forward in important ways. Nevertheless, significant gaps remain in elucidating the mechanisms that mediate associations between interparental conflict and children's developmental outcomes. For example, much of the work exploring various meditational mechanisms has been conducted in isolation of one another; that is, researchers have primarily examined one domain of functioning in these process models. However, simultaneous examination of the multiple pathways of influence may yield important insights into the processes by which interparental conflict impacts children. Some preliminary research bears this out. For example, Davies, Sturge-Apple, Winter, Cummings, and Farrell (2006) examined children's overt behavioral emotionality and subjective emotional feelings in response to witnessing interparental disputes as well as their internal representations of the

interparental relationship. They reported that behavioral and verbal expressions of interpartner anger and hostility were uniquely associated with children's behavioral and subjective dysregulation, whereas interparental contempt and disengagement was associated with children's insecure representations about the family. However, achieving a comprehensive understanding of the unfolding sequence of underlying mechanisms will require further work exploring the various identified mechanisms to determine how differentiation in pathways and outcomes may occur.

Associations between interparental conflicts, parenting risk processes, and child vulnerability may depend on important moderator variables. For example, any comprehensive model of interparental conflict must consider the possible role of both parent and child gender as a moderator of process-model pathways. Empirical research on the moderating role of parent gender is inconclusive at this early stage of the research process, a fact underscored by the lack of research disaggregating male- and female-perpetrated conflict compared to couple level operationalizations. With respect to child gender, studies tend to ignore gender issues by pooling boys and girls together in primary analyses or considering boys and girls in isolation from each other. The consequence of these approaches is to underestimate the impact of gender in cataloging the risk-associated interparental conflict or the accompanying family processes on children.

Systematic individual differences in children's attributes may also potentiate or ameliorate the impact of interparental conflict on developmental trajectories. Temperament, as reflected in individual differences in characteristic ways of behaving that are thought to be relatively constitutional in origin, may serve as an important variable in considering children's sensitivity to environmental events. Differential susceptibility frameworks propose that children evidence differentiation in their reactivity to environmental conditions (Belsky, 2005; Belsky, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van IJzendoorn, 2007). Thus, when family contexts are characterized by higher levels of discord, children who exhibit low levels of sensitivity evidence better psychological and physical adjustment relative to highly sensitive children. Conversely, in highly supportive environments, children who are highly reactive to environmental stimuli have a much greater capacity to thrive relative to their less sensitive counterparts (see Belsky & Pluess, 2009). Scant work has explored the role of temperament as a moderator of associations in interparental conflict process models; however, research so far suggests that these associations may vary as a function of children's temperament characteristics (e.g., David & Murphy, 2007; Davies, Sturge-Apple, & Cicchetti, 2011; Davies & Windle, 2001).

Finally, future endeavors in this area of research should also strive to improve on methodological rigor. In the context of the predominant use of cross-sectional designs in interparental conflict research, simply demonstrating cross-sectional associations between interparental conflict and children's functioning does not necessarily establish the sequential chain of events. Definitive tests of process models in family research require documenting that interparental difficulties prospectively increase child vulnerability to psychopathology over time. The use of longitudinal or

experimental designs in interparental conflict and child development research will bolster conclusions that linkages between interparental relations and child development are not the product of the operation of additional variables such as child temperament, parental symptomology, developmental history, or the strain faced by a family's experience living with a disruptive child (Tajima, 2000). Thus, as research progresses, longitudinal analyses that model change over time will be needed to test the directionality of associations between family processes and child adjustment in direct and indirect effects models relative to alternative models. In addition, the predominant reliance on single indicators of family process, particularly self-report assessments, limits our ability to capture a more holistic representation of the processes under study. Researchers must endeavor to capture multidimensional assessments including self-report measures, interview assessments, observational ratings (in-home, laboratory paradigms), and independent ratings (e.g., teacher reports) to name a few. The use of multimethod assessments in empirical research will allow for a more comprehensive picture of family dynamics without the limitation of biases of measurement associated with monomethod assessments.

In summary, there has been a tremendous amount of progress in generating and disseminating knowledge on the deleterious impact that interparental conflict has on child development. This body of work has already resulted in greater awareness of this public health problem in the community (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Davies et al., 2006). However, important avenues of research identifying multiple pathways involved in understanding how and why interparental conflict poses a risk for children's adjustment remain unexplored. This gap in knowledge has hindered the development of public policy and intervention services for children and families experiencing elevated levels of interpartner discord and emotional abuse (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Thus, the purpose of this review was to provide an understanding of where we have been as a field and propose a possible blueprint for a new generation of research aimed at identifying the mediating processes and moderating conditions that help elucidate the multiplicity of pathways underlying associations between interparental conflict and child maladjustment.

NOTE

1. For an examination of the combined and independent impact of witnessed interparental violence and child maltreatment, the interested reader may want to read the "Partner Abuse State of the Knowledge" article by MacDonnel (2012).

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