



Center for the Development of Peace and Well-Being

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2005-06 Fellowships
Summary Reports****Graduate Fellows****Neera Mehta**

Psychology

***Working Models of Attachment to Parents and Partners:
Implications for Affective Marital Interactions***

Marital conflict and dissolution have been linked to increased mental and physical health problems for spouses and for their children (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). One of the strongest correlates of marital satisfaction and stability is the quality of affective exchanges between spouses during conflict (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). However, an important unanswered question is what are the pathways that lead some individuals to display constructive emotional responses during marital conflict, whereas others display emotional responses that are destructive to their marriage during these interactions?

In the current study, I sought to investigate whether internalized working models of attachment are related to the quality of emotional exchanges between spouses during discussions of unresolved conflict. I was specifically interested in the unique contribution of attachment representations based on one's parents and one's spouse (over and above the other) on observed positive affect, anger, and sadness, all of which have been shown to predict relationship satisfaction and stability. I also investigated whether we could learn more about the potential influence of experiences with early caregivers by assessing the past and current emotional quality of relationships with mothers and fathers separately as opposed to assessing attachment representations based on descriptions of relationships with both parents.

Because a primary focus of this study was on internalized representations of attachment relationships, narrative interviews designed to access these internalized representations of working models based on early caregivers (Adult Attachment Interview; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1985) and on current romantic relationships (Couple Attachment Interview; Silver & Cohn, 1992) were utilized. Participants for the current study are part of a longitudinal study (Cowan, Cowan, Ablow, Johnson, & Measelle, 2005) in which couples completed attachment interviews and a 10-minute videotaped conflict resolution task, which was coded for observed affective behavior.

Hierarchical linear models examining the association between attachment models and affective behavior demonstrated that couple attachment insecurity was associated with less observed positive affect than couple attachment security, over and above attachment representations based on one's parents. Although parent attachment did not predict affective behavior once couple attachment was accounted for, current involving anger at one's mother during the attachment interview predicted less observed positive affect during the marital interaction. Taken together, these findings suggest that activation of the attachment system in adulthood may be closely linked to *current* emotional experiences regarding both

parental and romantic attachment figures, with a possible spillover of emotions across different relationship domains.

Given the significant links between emotional interactions and marital quality, understanding the influence of these attachment representations has important implications for interventions with individuals and couples. For example, the current research suggests that improving the security of the bond between partners will do more to improve the emotional quality of romantic relationships than focusing on the influence of attachment representations based on relationships with one's parents. Couples therapists may benefit from noting whether clients are exhibiting current involving anger at their mothers and whether this anger appears to be negatively affecting their ability to regulate their emotions during conflict with their partners. In addition, for therapists working with individual partners, the results suggest attention to the potential effects of attachment-related issues on the client's behavior in their intimate adult relationships. In sum, these results underscore the importance of investigating the role of attachment representations in the quality of emotional exchanges between spouses and suggest many avenues for future research.

Jonathan Chow (Summer fellow)

Political Science

Reevaluating the Enemy: Overcoming Attitudinal Inertia after Interstate Conflict

This project was a preliminary attempt to explore how hostile nationalist attitudes are changed following interstate wars. It surveyed the secondary literature and attempted to identify avenues for future research, using the cases of post-World War II reconciliation efforts by Germany and Japan as examples. Can people overcome strong feelings of hostility toward former enemies, allowing for the possibility of reconciliation not only at the diplomatic level but also at the national level?

The process of forgiveness and reconciliation, typically viewed as occurring between individuals, is significantly complicated when it is transposed to the communal level. Political structures, institutions and competing interest groups can all hamper efforts to forge lasting reconciliation. Moreover, hostile attitudes can be preserved or even exacerbated as younger generations, often insulated from alternative viewpoints, learn them from home, school or popular culture. Virulent nationalism can poison international relations and discourage leaders from taking initiatives to foster cooperation. Counteracting it requires fundamentally changing individuals' beliefs about former national enemies. Specifically, evidence points to the need to foster empathy—the desire to understand (though not necessarily agree with) the other side's perspective, to put oneself in the other's shoes. This requires reversing the dehumanization that accompanies war and seeing the other as an individual person rather than a faceless adversary (Halpern and Weinstein, 2004). Yet how can empathy be developed on a national level? How can it be transmitted across cultural boundaries? What sorts of instruments are available to foster it?

Preliminary research suggests that when it comes to developing empathy among people in different countries following interstate war, the involvement of political leaders is extremely important. Since there is likely to be relatively little direct interaction between people in both countries, the actions of political leaders take on added symbolic significance. Political leaders can effectively become stand-ins for their own citizens when representing abroad. The role of leaders as symbolic representatives of their people beyond their national borders makes them particularly important in setting the tone of reconciliation efforts. For example, West German Chancellor Willy Brandt made a spontaneous and emotionally charged gesture of repentance on a visit to Poland in December of 1970 when he fell to his knees before a memorial to the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The act helped to set the tone for West Germany's diplomatic engagement with Eastern Europe and was widely hailed in the international media as marking the start of a new relationship between Germany and Poland.

Yet leadership is only one factor of many that can impinge on the reconciliation process. Unlike the German case, Japan's efforts at reconciliation with its neighbors, especially China, have been far less successful. In many ways, it is politically impossible for Chinese and Japanese leaders to express empathy for each other's views. What might be possible between individuals is made much more difficult by the

presence of external political forces that can impose heavy costs on leaders who take the initiative to acknowledge the validity of the other side's views, particularly in matters of symbolic importance where the prestige of the nation is at stake. For instance, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi derives his support from conservative factions within the Liberal Democratic Party, including veterans' groups that strongly support his continued visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine honoring Japan's war dead, among them a number of war criminals. The visits are regularly denounced by the Chinese government as fostering Japanese militarism and glorifying war crimes. The Chinese Communist Party, for its part, has increasingly relied on its ability to mobilize nationalist sentiment to maintain its domestic legitimacy, particularly as economic growth begins to slow. Indeed, evidence suggests that popular anti-Japanese nationalism in China is significantly more virulent than the variety expressed by the Party (Gries, 2004). Vengeance, rather than reconciliation, is an oft-repeated theme among Chinese nationalists. If the people of a nation do not desire reconciliation, their leader cannot force it on them. West Germany's reconciliation process was born out of the postwar generation's disillusionment and guilt over the crimes of their parents' generation during the Holocaust. In Japan, however, the conquest of East Asia is not viewed with the same unambiguous moral censure directed at the Holocaust. A newspaper poll of 1,058 Japanese in 2005 found that only 43 percent of those surveyed believed that Japan's actions during the war were "clearly wrong", with the rest responding that the war was either unavoidable or that they were unsure. This percentage fell to 36 percent among 20-to-30-year olds (Washington Post, 8/30/2005). Without a sense of guilt and responsibility, there is no place for remorse, and without remorse, it is easy to dismiss Chinese protests as unfounded and politically motivated, blocking opportunities for empathetic connection. Likewise, if Chinese nationalists continue to depict the Japanese as bloodthirsty barbarians rather than fellow human beings, they will lack the empathy to accept Japanese expressions of remorse as being truly contrite.

This preliminary research suggests that reconciliation processes cannot be borne exclusively by leaders. Instead, the attitudes of leaders can both shape and reflect the will of the people they represent. Future research should focus on how remorse can be engendered within a population that does not see the need for reconciliation, as well as on what specifically leads a population to accept expressions of remorse as genuine and sufficient to build a new relationship upon.

Undergraduate Fellow

Rebecca Rialon

Psychology

An Investigation of the Effects of Witnessing Domestic Violence on Preschool-Age Children's Empathic Responsiveness

It is estimated that between 3.3 and 10 million children in the United States between the ages of 3 and 17 live in households in which domestic violence is perpetrated (Carlson, 1984; Strauss, 1992; Peled, Jaffe, & Edelson, 1995). While many parents report trying to shelter their children from such incidences of violent marital conflict (Rosenberg & Rossmann, 1990), research suggests that children in violent homes commonly see, hear, and intervene in episodes of domestic violence (Fantuzzo, 1997).

Though the research documenting the often profound and far-reaching deleterious effects of partner violence on school-age children is growing, only a small number of empirical studies have focused on how preschool-age children's social and emotional adjustment is affected by witnessing violence directed at their mothers, and none has investigated the role of maternal psychological functioning in mediating this relationship. Given the increased vulnerability of young children (Kracke, 2001; Osofsky, 1995), and the high risk for the child to imitate such violence in future relationships (Kalmuss, 1984), there is a critical need to understand the process by which exposure to domestic violence may decrease one's ability to feel and understand another's pain (i.e., to empathize with a distressed individual).

My research examines the empathic responsiveness of thirty preschool-age children (between 3 and 5 years of age) who have witnessed severe marital discord in comparison to a demographically matched sample of thirty non-witnesses. The primary question is whether children who witness marital violence in the home are adversely affected in their ability to empathize with the distress of a peer. More specifically, do these children exhibit less empathy in their verbal responses to a question measuring their emotional and cognitive reaction to another's suffering (measured by a hypothetical scenario) than the comparative sample?

I hypothesized that child witnesses of domestic violence will be less empathic in their verbal responses than children from homes where domestic violence did not occur. I also hypothesized that the *amount* of violence witnessed by the child will directly relate to his/her overall level of empathy, and that maternal psychopathology will mediate, or explain, this relationship. In addition, exposure to domestic violence is hypothesized to predict preschoolers' lower verbal intellectual functioning and internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. Ultimately, understanding these sources of risk could lead to new ways to think about intervening or preventing the development of social and emotional problems as well as the perpetration of violence in future relationships in young children exposed to domestic violence.

My study is based on data collected at the Child Trauma Research Project (CTRP), a randomized clinical trial in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco. All child participants were videotaped during the administration of the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence Revised (WPPSI-R; Wechsler, 1989) as part of a more extensive assessment procedure (CTRP) from an earlier study (Ybarra, Wilkens, and Lieberman, *in press*). Children's verbal responses to the question, "What do you do if you see a friend crying?" were recorded from assessments of the verbal comprehension subtest of the WPPSI-R (subtest 4). These responses were qualitatively examined and further scored for both affective and cognitive components of empathy, respectively, and then combined into a total empathy score.

As part of the clinical assessment, each mother provided the data for the independent variable of interest (i.e., children's exposure to marital violence). Mothers also provided the information regarding the other variables (i.e., children's exposure to community violence, children's emotional and behavior

problems, maternal psychological functioning, and quality of the mother-child relationship), which were assessed using additional clinical measures.

The results of my study indicate that preschool-age children who witness domestic violence are indeed less empathic in their responses to a hypothetical scenario assessing their empathic reactivity to the distress of a peer compared to a sample of non-exposed children. The fact that the children from abusive homes showed a deficit in abilities associated with empathy may portend poor interpersonal relationships in middle childhood, as such children may be unable to identify emotions which others feel and respond appropriately. Such a deficiency may extend longer, especially inhibiting the development and maintenance of intimate relationships.

I also found that the exposure to domestic violence predicted (or directly influenced) preschoolers' lower verbal IQ scores as well as their internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. Surprisingly, however, the amount of violence witnessed by each child did not directly affect his/her deficient empathic responsiveness in this study.

Overall, I believe that this study helps to illuminate the pathways through which exposure to violence may lead to deviations in social, emotional, and behavioral competencies in youths, and can therefore facilitate additional research that is needed to better comprehend these potentially mediating processes. Developing a better understanding of causal mechanisms and future pathways of risk for children exposed to domestic violence can lead to more effective treatment, intervention, and preventive programs for this young and developmentally vulnerable population.