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Family Members as Third Parties in Dyadic Family Conflict: Strategies, Alliances, and Outcomes

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VUCHINICH, SAMUEL; EMERY, ROBERT E.; and CASSIDY, JUDE. *Family Members as Third Parties in Dyadic Family Conflict: Strategies, Alliances, and Outcomes*. CHILD DEVELOPMENT, 1988, 59, 1293–1302. Systems theorists have argued that triads rather than dyads need to be considered as a basic interaction unit, particularly in regard to episodes of conflict. While theoretically appealing, the description of the strategies used and alliances formed when third parties intervene in dyadic conflict presents a number of conceptual and empirical challenges. In the present report, a reliable system for coding such third-party participation in verbal conflicts is described and is used to analyze routine family conflicts that were observed during dinner. A number of specific findings of interest are reported, including that girls were more likely than boys to intervene in all family disputes except marital conflicts, that mothers and fathers rarely sided against each other when intervening as third parties, and that the third-party strategies most commonly used corresponded with family roles: fathers used authority strategies, mothers used mediational tactics, and children used distraction. Of greater importance, however, are the general findings that document the influence of third parties on dyadic conflict. Additional family members frequently joined dyadic family conflicts, they were about equally likely to attempt to end or to continue the conflict, they formed alliances about half of the time, and their intervention strategies were related to the outcome of the conflict as well as its patterning.

Whether the focus is on marital distress, parent-child interaction, or sibling relationships, family conflict is often viewed in dyadic terms. Some family-systems (e.g., Minuchin, 1985) and developmental (e.g., Sameroff, 1983) theorists have argued, however, that the triad needs to be considered as a basic interaction unit. Whether intentionally or unwittingly, additional family members often become involved in what begins as dyadic conflict. These third parties may form alliances with one side against the other, and their actions may resolve, exacerbate, or fail to influence the outcome of the conflict. Family therapists have suggested, moreover, that the manner in which others are triangulated in dyadic disputes not only influences the character and outcome of the conflict itself, but it may also have long-term implications for their individual adjustment (Minuchin, 1974).

Both the normative and the individual difference issues are illustrated by consideration of children's involvement in their parents' marital conflict (Emery, 1982). The implicit or explicit pulls to form alliances confront the children of divorce with inherent loyalty dilemmas (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), much as they pose a challenge to the neutrality of divorce mediators (Emery, Shaw, & Jackson, 1987). One common explanation for individual differences in children's adjustment is scapegoating, in which parents deny marital distress and blame a child for family difficulties. The pattern has been said to play an etiological role in such diverse problems as unmanageable diabetes (Minuchin, Rosman, & Baker, 1978) and conduct disorders (Christensen, Phillips, Glasgow, & Johnson, 1983).

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The analysis of triads adds considerable conceptual and empirical complexity to the study of family interaction. Even with the present circumscribed focus on conflict, the complexities still are numerous. As in the study of dyadic conflict, the content of the dispute, affective expression, and relative interpersonal power remain central concerns. However, numerous further complications become apparent when one considers the wide variety of ways in which third parties can participate in dyadic conflicts. They can enter the conflict as an active intermediary, attempt to distract the disputants from their disagreements, or deliberately withdraw from the conflict altogether. Third parties may use their authority to halt the conflict, act as a mediator with no special power over either side, or exploit the division created by the dispute to obtain influence they would not ordinarily have. Finally, as suggested by the examples above, the potential for third parties to form alliances with one side or the other adds a new dimension that recasts the dyadic conflict. In considering these forms of naturalistic intervention, it is worth noting that formal methods of third-party intervention, such as adjudication, mediation, and advocacy, vary along similar dimensions.

Empirically, the analysis of constructs such as intervention strategies and alliances would seem to require some special adaptations in the way interactions are examined. One issue concerns the level of abstraction of the coding system. Neither microanalytic researchers who focus on the positivity and negativity of moment-by-moment actions (e.g., Birchler, Weiss, & Vincent, 1975) nor more macroanalytic investigators who obtain self-reports of global styles of conflict (e.g., Bonacich, Grusky, & Peyrot, 1985; Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Strauss, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980) have adequately described the character and patterning of conflict in the family (Emery, Joyce, & Fincham, 1987). A second empirical issue relates to the ecological validity of the conflict that is studied (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Since people can adjust much of their behavior according to perceived experimental demands, it is desirable to study interaction in settings that match day-to-day situations as closely as possible. This concern is particularly relevant to experimental studies of third-party intervention (Rubin, 1980).

In this article, we report on a new system for coding verbal conflicts in which at least three family members become involved. The system uses codes between the molecular and molar extremes and shares conceptual ele-

ments in common with other methods of coding strategic moves (Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1984) and patterns of alliances (Bonacich et al., 1985; Gilbert, Christensen, & Margolin, 1984) in family conflicts. Use of the system is demonstrated with an analysis of routine conflicts that occurred while families were having dinner in their own homes. The system was used to address the following questions: (a) How frequently do other family members intervene in dyadic conflicts? (b) What strategies do third parties use in their interventions? (c) How often and with whom are alliances formed? (d) Do family roles (mother, father, son, daughter) predict alliances and intervention strategies? (e) How does third-party intervention affect the outcome of the conflict as indexed by the length of the episode, the conditional probability that conflict will continue, and the final outcome of the dispute?

While a number of predictions could be formulated in regard to each of these questions, our primary present concerns were: (1) to document that third family members do indeed enter dyadic conflicts, form alliances, and influence outcomes, and (2) to suggest a method for further empirical examination of conflict in the family system. For these reasons, data analysis focuses on description rather than hypothesis testing.

Method

Subjects

The sample was composed of a diverse group of 52 families from five states (South Carolina, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Georgia). Seventy-six percent of the families were white, 24% black; 70% lived in urban and suburban areas, 30% had rural residences. Based on the estimated property value of the family dwelling, 12% of the families were upper class, 61% were middle class, and 27% lower class. A range of different family structures were represented in the sample. There were 39 dinners from two-parent families with from one to six children ranging in age from 3 to 22 years. There were 17 dinners from families with only the mother present in which there were from one to three children ranging in age from 2 to 6 years. In four cases, two dinners from the same family were included in the sample. None of the families in the sample were involved in psychotherapy.

Procedures

Families were recruited by seeking volunteers in college classrooms, newspaper

notices, and through personal networks. The person who was initially contacted by the researchers arranged for a dinner to be recorded in the family home. Families were informed that the recording was part of a research project on routine family interaction and were advised to have their normal dinner. Audio- and videorecording procedures were designed to facilitate the family's ease with the recording. No additional lighting was used, and no researchers were on the premises during the dinners as the camera was fixed in a tripod.

The recorded dinners were reviewed for the occurrence of verbal conflict. Verbal conflicts were defined as instances where one person opposed a statement, action, or personal attribute of another. They included disagreements, accusations, corrections, insults, and challenges. Intercoder reliability for locating conflict moves was checked using Cohen's kappa, with pairwise kappas among four raters averaging 0.77. More detail on this definition of verbal conflict can be found elsewhere (Goodwin, 1982; Maynard, 1985; Shantz, 1986; Vuchinich, 1984, 1986). In order to be considered an episode of conflict, at least two consecutive verbal oppositions needed to be made. These conflict episodes always involved at least two parties and sometimes included additional family members who entered the conflict. When three consecutive conversational turns occurred without continued verbal conflict, the episode was considered to be over. Once identified on tape in this manner, conflict episodes were carefully transcribed. While some analysis of the conflicts in this data set have been reported elsewhere (Vuchinich, 1984, 1986), the present focus on third parties is unique.

It should be noted that in all data analyses that follow, these episodes of conflict are treated as the unit of analysis. This means that more than one conflict from the same family may be included in a given statistical test, even though such episodes are not independent in the strictest sense. An alternative would be to aggregate conflict episodes for each family and to use families as the unit of analysis. This was not done because of the small sample sizes and the small number of conflicts for many families. More important, the present intent was to describe the patterning of episodes of conflict, not to draw conclusions about individual differences between families; thus we view the conflict episodes as the appropriate units of analysis, notwithstanding their lack of independence.

Coding

The transcribed conflict episodes that included at least three people were coded using the Third Party Intervention Coding System (TPICS) developed as part of this project. (A copy of the coding manual can be obtained from the second author.) The fundamental unit of the coding system is the single conversational "turn." A conversational turn is everything said by one speaker while he or she holds the speaking floor. A turn ends when the speaker stops talking and silence occurs or when another speaker begins talking (Burke, 1974; Duncan, 1972; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Simultaneous talk that could be transcribed was treated as separate turns by different speakers. Each turn was coded separately and sequentially for the following information: (a) the family role of the speaker (e.g., father, mother), (b) who the speaker sided against (if anyone), (c) who the speaker sided with (if anyone), (d) whether the speaker was acting in the role of a fighter or of a third party, and (e) the type of strategic move made by the speaker for that turn (see Table 1 for a summary of the codes).

The *sides-against* category was coded with the identity of the person the speaker was opposing, and the *sides-with* category was coded with the identity of the person with whom the speaker was aligning. Coding of both of these categories involved a judgment about the opposition and/or alliance that was explicit or implicit in each speaker's verbal statement. The targets of opposition and alliance were determined for each turn, and they were allowed to change as the conflict episode proceeded. A "no-sides" category was used when it was determined that the speaker did not take sides either with or against one of the parties in conflict.

The distinction between *fighter* and *third-party* roles is an important one in the coding system. Fighters, of which there are always exactly two, initiate and continue conflict, while third parties enter an ongoing conflict. As long as the same conflict continues, all parties remain in their roles as either a fighter or a third party. Fighter and third-party roles can change within any given conflict episode, however, as new conflicts may develop between an original fighter and a third party or between two actors who originally entered the conflict as third parties. A new conflict begins when two parties other than the current fighters are coded as siding against each other.

The coding of *strategic moves* involves a judgment about the function that the speak-

TABLE 1
SUMMARY AND EXAMPLE OF THIRD-PARTY INTERVENTION CODING SYSTEM

Category	Codes
Sides against	(1) identity of opponent; (2) no sides
Sides with	(1) identity of ally; (2) no sides
Role	(1) fighter (always two); (2) third party
Fighter move	(1) conflict continuation; (2) give in/compromise; (3) withdrawal; (4) other/neutral
Third-party move	(1) conflict continuation; (2) authority; (3) mediation/information; (4) distraction; (5) nonintervention
Outcome	(1) compromise; (2) submission; (3) standoff; (4) withdrawal

The following conflict begins when the mother opposes the daughter's plans for Saturday. Sue and Rita are friends of the daughter who are not present at the dinner. Column 1 gives the "sides-against" code, column 2 gives the "sides-with" code, column 3 gives the role, and column 4 gives the move type. In the example, M = mother, F = father, S = son, D = daughter, f = fighter, t = third party, c = conflict continuation, a = authority, m = mediation/information, d = distraction, No = no sides taken.

1	2	3	4	
			D (to M): Sue and Rita are coming over Saturday.	
D	f	c	M (to D): There you go again, looking for trouble. You know we're going to Grandma's Saturday.	
M	f	c	D (to M): You didn't say I had to go.	
D	f	c	M (to D): You know what I meant.	
D	M	t	c	F (to D): Don't argue with your mother. You're going.
M	f	c	D (to M): But I've been planning this for weeks.	
No	No	t	m	S (to F): Why couldn't she have them over in the morning, then we could go to Grandma's in the afternoon?
S	f	c	D (to S): You stay outa this. You're just makin' trouble.	
D	f	c	S (to D): I was trying to help, you jerk . . .	
No	No	t	a	F: I don't want to listen to this. You two button it. [2.3-sec silence]
No		t	d	M (to F): Did Mr. Baxter show you that big tomato? F (to S): Yeah, wasn't that something?
The outcome code for this episode is standoff.				

er's statement serves in the conflict episode. Different definitions of strategic moves were used for fighters and third parties. Fighter moves were coded into one of four mutually exclusive categories: (a) *conflict continuation*—the fighter continues the conflict by opposing what another person says, does, or is; (b) *give in/compromise*—the fighter submits to or agrees with the opponent or offers to accept part of the opponent's position; (c) *withdrawal*—the fighter refuses to talk further or leaves the room in the middle of a conflict; (d) *other/neutral*—the fighter makes a statement that is unconnected to the conflict, such as a side comment associated with the logistics of the dinner (e.g., "Pass the potatoes"). Incomplete utterances are also coded in this category. In contrast to conflict continuation moves, all of the last three move types are assumed to be designed to discontinue the conflict.

Third-party moves were coded into one of the following five mutually exclusive categories: (a) *conflict continuation*—the third party becomes an active participant in the ongoing conflict, siding against someone and usually siding with someone else; (b) *authority*—the third party attempts to stop the conflict when acting from a position of power, often by using directives (e.g., "Stop that!"); (c) *mediation/information*—the third party intervenes in the conflict by providing information, making suggestions, reframing the issues, or using related tactics in an attempt to end the conflict. Unlike the authority move, in mediation/information the third party enters the conflict as an equal of, or subordinate to, the fighters; (d) *distraction*—the third party makes an initiating statement that is irrelevant to the conflict in an attempt to change the topic of conversation (e.g., "Nice day today"); (e) *nonintervention*—the third

party makes a statement unrelated to the conflict in response to an other/neutral, distraction, or nonintervention move. As with fighter moves, all third-party moves other than conflict continuation are assumed to be designed to discontinue the conflict.

The final part of the coding system describes the outcome of the entire conflict episode; thus it was coded only once for each episode. Four categories were used: (a) *compromise*—each fighter gives in a little to accept a position that falls between the extremes in the conflict; (b) *submission*—one fighter gives in to the other; (c) *standoff*—there is no resolution of any kind to the conflict, it gets dropped and other activities are taken up; (d) *withdrawal*—one fighter refuses to continue to talk or leaves the room. A similar conflict outcome code was used by Shantz (1986). An example of the use of the coding system for a transcribed conflict episode is presented in Table 1.

Interobserver reliability.—At least two raters independently coded all conflict episodes used in the analysis. Reliability of the system was calculated from the turn-by-turn codes of three different pairs of raters (the authors) over 748 turns. When there was a disagreement between coders, a consensus code was determined by careful review of the transcript.

The overall Cohen's kappa for the fighter and third-party strategic move codes was 0.76. The hit rates (pairwise percent agreement) and frequencies (in parentheses) for each move type were as follows: conflict continuation (fighter and third party), 0.93 ($n = 540$); give in/compromise, 0.71 ($n = 26$); withdraw, 1.00 ($n = 3$); other/neutral, 0.66 ($n = 60$); authority, 0.92 ($n = 12$); mediation/information, 0.78 ($n = 45$); distraction, 0.83 ($n = 38$); nonintervention, 0.84 ($n = 24$).

For the sides-against and sides-with codes, a hit was counted only if raters agreed both on whether or not a side was taken and on with whom the side was taken. Because different numbers of people were present at dinners and spoke more or less often, the probability of chance agreement is extremely difficult to calculate for these codes. For this reason, kappas were not computed; however, the hit rate for the sides-with code was 0.93 ($n = 662$), and for the sides-against code it was 0.91 ($n = 692$). Since fighter and third-party roles are defined completely by the sides-against coding, this last figure can be used as a lower boundary estimate of the reliability of this code.

The overall kappa for the conflict outcome codes was 0.75. Individual category hit rates and frequencies were: standoff, 0.92 ($n = 45$); submission, 0.89 ($n = 9$); withdrawal, 0.83 ($n = 6$); compromise, 0.57 ($n = 7$).

Results

Frequency of Third-Party Intervention

In the total sample of dinners that were taped, 176 episodes of conflict were identified. A third party intervened in 38.1% ($n = 67$) of these conflicts, and the average number of moves made by third parties who intervened was 3.5. The likelihood of third-party intervention increased when more people were present at the dinner. A third party intervened in 20.6% of the conflicts in three-person dinners, 34.1% of the conflicts in four-person dinners, 47.0% of the conflicts in five-person dinners, and 62% of the conflicts in six-person dinners.

Strategies and Alliances in Third-Party Intervention

The frequency with which third parties used the various intervention strategies is summarized in Table 2. Whether or not an alliance was formed in conjunction with the various moves is also displayed in this Table. Of all third-party moves in the entire sample ($n = 232$), alliances were formed in 54.3% ($n = 126$) of the cases. In the cases where the third party took sides, 84.9% of the time he or she made a conflict-continuation move.

No alliances were formed for 45.9% of the third-party moves. Most of these moves (70.1%) were attempts to end the conflict by distraction (34.6%), mediation (30.8%), or authority (4.7%). About one in five of these moves (22.4%) was a nonintervention move, and the rest (6.5%) were conflict moves where the third party opposed neither fighter.

Family Roles and Intervention

Third-party moves.—A subsample of 48 conflicts that took place when both parents were present was identified in order to render comparisons between mothers and fathers comparable for the analysis of family roles. Comparisons between sons and daughters are made difficult by their uneven representation, however. In the two-parent subsample, an average of 1.2 sons were present, while the average number of daughters was 1.6. Thus, daughters made up 33.3% of the participants in the subsample dinners, mothers and fathers each made up 20.8%, and sons made up 25.0%.

Of all third-party moves in the two-parent subsample ($n = 143$), 21.0% were made by

TABLE 2
FREQUENCIES OF ALLIANCES AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

	SIDE TAKEN		NO SIDE TAKEN	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Conflict continuation	107	(84.9)	7	(6.6)
Mediate/information	12	(9.5)	33	(31.1)
Authority	7	(5.6)	5	(4.8)
Distraction	...	^a	37	(34.9)
Nonintervention	...	^a	24	(22.6)
Total	126	100.0	106	(100.0)

^a Distraction or nonintervention with sides taken are not legal codes in TPICS.

mothers, 19.6% were made by fathers, 18.2% were made by sons, and 41.3% were made by daughters. Given the imbalance in their representation in the dinners, this is a rather even distribution. However, because a person cannot be a third party when he or she is a fighter and because of the unequal representation of sons and daughters, it is desirable to express the likelihood of third-party intervention in a way that takes into account the opportunity for intervention. This is easily done by dividing the number of interventions a given family role made by the number of interventions that could have been made (i.e., the conflicts during which the party was present but was not a fighter). This ratio indicated a likelihood of intervening of 0.35 for mothers, 0.28 for fathers, 0.21 for sons, and 0.56 for daughters. Daughters' frequency of intervention was significantly greater than that of any other family member. For example, the difference between daughters and mothers, who had the second highest intervention likelihood, was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 191) = 8.50, p < .01$. There also was a trend for mothers to be more likely to intervene than fathers, $\chi^2(1, N = 185) = 3.62, p < .10$.

The likelihood of a third party intervening was influenced not only by their own role but also by the family roles of the fighters. When the two-parent subsample was expanded to include conflicts in which no third party had intervened, 23% of the conflicts were between mothers and fathers, 21.9% were between children, and 55.1% between a parent and a child. A third party intervened in only 34.9% ($n = 15$) of the conflicts between mother and father, but an intervention occurred in 78.0% ($n = 32$) of the conflicts between children. Third parties also intervened in 80.0% ($n = 36$) of the father-child conflicts and 55.2% ($n = 32$) of the mother-child conflicts.

The family roles of the fighters had some effect on who intervened as well as whether or not intervention occurred. In conflicts between anyone except the parents, the likelihood that daughters would intervene was 0.63, while for sons it was 0.20 (controlling for their respective opportunities for intervention). This difference is highly significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 105) = 17.16, p < .001$. In conflicts between mothers and fathers, however, the intervention likelihood for sons was 0.37, and for daughters it was 0.22. While this difference is not statistically significant, it suggests a reversal in the likelihood of intervention in this one form of conflict. As another example of how the family roles of the fighters influenced who intervened, the likelihood of intervening in conflicts between children, controlling for opportunity to intervene, was 0.42 for mothers and 0.16 for fathers, a statistically significant difference, $\chi^2(1, N = 76) = 9.17, p < .01$.

Family roles were also linked to the type of third-party move that was made. As displayed in Table 3, children most often used distraction (64.7%) and never used authority, while parents used mediate/information moves most frequently (53.3%) but rarely used distraction (13.3%). Of the noncontinuation moves made by mothers, 72.2% were mediate/information, while 58.3% of the noncontinuation moves made by fathers were the authority type. Overall, mediate/information comprised 56% of the noncontinuation moves made by females but only 24% of those made by males.

Alliances.—The link between family roles and alliance formation is best examined by considering the likelihood of taking sides, controlling for the opportunity to do so, as was done for family roles and intervention moves. The likelihood was 0.25 that a child would side with another child and 0.19 that a child

TABLE 3

USE OF SELECTED INTERVENTION STRATEGIES BY PARENTS AND CHILDREN: TWO-PARENT SUBSAMPLE

	AUTHORITY		DISTRACTION		MEDIATE/INFO		TOTAL	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Parent	10	(33.3)	4	(13.3)	16	(53.4)	30	(100)
Child	0	(0.0)	22	(64.7)	12	(35.3)	34	(100)

would side with a parent when intervening as a third party. The likelihood of a parent siding with the other parent was 0.22, while the likelihood of a parent siding with a child was 0.13. This difference only approaches significance, $\chi^2(1, N = 232) = 3.81, p < .10$, but it suggests a tendency for parents to side with each other. The alliance between parents was more pronounced in the siding-*against* codes. The likelihood of a parent siding against a parent was 0.04, while the likelihood of a parent siding against a child was 0.28. This difference is highly significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 233) = 21.77, p < .001$. The likelihood of a child siding against a parent was 0.19 and against another child was 0.24, a difference that was not statistically significant.

Third-Party Intervention and Outcome

The effect of third-party intervention on the outcome of the conflict episodes was assessed in three ways. First, the influence of the third party on the length of the conflict episode was examined. Second, the conditional probability that conflict would be continued on the move immediately following third-party intervention was computed. Finally, the relation between third-party intervention and the final outcome of the episode of conflict was calculated.

Length of conflict episode.—The average number of moves in conflict episodes in which intervention occurred was 11.2 (SD = 8.2) turns. For conflicts where no intervention occurred, the average length was 3.7 (SD = 2.5). Thus, conflict episodes in which there was third-party intervention lasted more than twice as long as those without it, $t(174) = 8.71, p < .01$. The average number of fighter moves that occurred before a third-party intervention was 3.2 (SD = 2.0). Since it takes two moves for the fighters to “square off” in a conflict, if third parties intervened in the conflict, they tended to do so at the beginning. After the third party intervened, there were an average of 4.5 (SD = 5.4) fighter moves and 2.5 (SD = 3.6) additional third-party moves. Therefore, the extension of conflict episodes after intervention was partially due to additional third-party moves.

The type of move that a third party used to initiate an intervention was related to the course of the episode. When the first move made by the third party was conflict continuation, the average number of conflict moves after the intervention was 7.68 (SD = 8.3). But when the first third-party intervention was any other move (e.g., distraction, mediation), the average number of conflict moves after the intervention was 2.89 (SD = 4.6). This difference approaches significance, $t(64) = 1.89, p < .10$.

Contingency in intervention.—The effect of third-party intervention on conflict also can be characterized by examining how fighters and third parties reacted to each others’ moves. The low frequency of some move types, especially for different family roles, precluded a complete contingency analysis of the coding system (Bakeman & Gottman, 1986). However, a revealing analysis comes from considering whether a move was made by a third party or a fighter and collapsing all moves into conflict continuation or noncontinuation (i.e., give in/compromise, withdraw, neutral/other, distraction, mediation, authority, or nonintervention) categories. Since more than one third party can intervene, third-party to third-party sequences do occur in this analysis, and they are included in Table 4.

The frequencies and *z* scores for fighter and third-party responses to the immediately prior move for the entire third-party sample are displayed in Table 4 as calculated using the ELAG computer program (Bakeman, 1983) with the Allison and Liker (1982) estimation procedure. The *z* scores indicate whether the conditional probability of an event occurring is significantly greater than its unconditional probability. This expresses the tendency of one behavior to follow another. The *z* scores indicate that fighters reciprocate moves, matching conflict with conflict and nonconflict with nonconflict. This tendency holds regardless of whether the prior speaker was a fighter or a third party, as seven of the eight fighter-response *z* scores were well over 1.96. Third-party moves generally were less contin-

TABLE 4
Z SCORES FOR FIGHTER AND THIRD-PARTY RESPONSE TO CONFLICT AND NONCONFLICT MOVES

PRIOR MOVE	FIGHTER RESPONSE		THIRD-PARTY RESPONSE	
	C	N	C	N
Fighter:				
C	2.16 (116)	-3.70 (18)	1.91 (50)	-1.39 (29)
N	-3.79 (10)	2.71 (13)	.06 (9)	2.43 (13)
Third party:				
C	2.31 (64)	-1.37 (12)	.16 (22)	-1.98 (11)
N	-2.31 (37)	4.00 (27)	-2.56 (10)	2.01 (22)

NOTE.—C = conflict-continuation move; N = nonconflict move. Frequencies are in parentheses.

gent on prior moves than were fighters' moves. Of the eight third-party response *z* scores in Table 4, only five are significantly greater than chance, and two of those are barely above the 1.96 cut-off point. Unlike fighters, third parties tended *not* to reciprocate conflict moves, but, like fighters, they reciprocated nonconflict moves by both fighters and other third parties.

Intervention and final outcome.—A stand-off (64.5%) was the most frequent final outcome found for the entire sample of conflict episodes, followed by submission (22.1%), compromise (9.3%), and withdrawal (4.1%). Submission was about half as likely in episodes with intervention than in episodes without it (13.4% vs. 27.6%), and withdrawal was nine times more likely in episodes with intervention (9.0% vs. 1.0%), although its frequency was still very low (*n* = 6). The likelihood of the conflict episode ending in a stand-off or a compromise was about the same regardless of whether or not a third party intervened.

Discussion

The present findings indicate that third family members clearly influence the process and outcome of dyadic family conflict. Third parties intervened in dyadic conflict about one-third of the time, they used various tactics designed to continue or end the conflict, and they frequently formed alliances with some family members against others. These findings provide empirical justification for the system's concern with triads. Further descriptive research is needed before normative patterns of conflict in family triads can be adequately characterized, functional and dys-

functional families can be compared, and the psychological impact of different patterns of conflict management on individual family members can be assessed. Still, it is clear that the detailed, reliable assessment of third-party intervention in dyadic family conflict is possible. Moreover, a number of the specific results of the present study are of interest and merit further discussion.

As a family systems conceptualization would suggest, we found alliances to be common, but unlike what has been reported in some past research (Bonacich et al., 1985), alliances were not necessarily formed within generations. The frequency with which children sided with and against parents and with and against other children was rather even. Parents were somewhat more likely to take sides with the other parent than with a child, but much more dramatic was the finding that parents rarely sided *against* each other. When one parent was fighting with a child, the second parent rarely entered this conflict in opposition to their spouse. This finding is heartening given research on the importance of interparental consistency in child rearing.

Family roles had several interesting influences on third-party intervention. Mothers and especially daughters intervened more frequently than fathers and sons, perhaps due to the "peacekeeping" duties associated with the female role in the family. Third-party interventions were also more likely to occur in conflicts between children than in conflicts between adults. Parental power is reflected in this difference. The finding that daughters intervened much more frequently than sons in all disputes except those between mother and father is particularly interesting in light of re-

search suggesting that boys have more obviously adverse reactions to interparental conflict (Cummings, Iannotti, & Zahn-Waxler, 1985; Emery, 1982).

Family roles also constrained the use of intervention strategies. When acting as third parties, authority moves were typically made by fathers, mediation was used most frequently by mothers, and distraction was usually used by children. This is consistent with the stereotype of the father as authority, the mother as peacekeeper, and the children as less powerful or socially adept.

While the involvement of third parties was associated with longer conflict episodes, it seemed to contribute to the ending of conflicts in at least two ways. First, third parties tended not to reciprocate conflict-continuation moves, but they did reciprocate non-conflict moves. The importance of not reciprocating conflict moves has been noted as an important element of effective conflict management in couples (Gottman, 1979) and families (Patterson, 1982). The influence of the third party's pacification moves was also evident in a second empirical finding. When the third parties began their intervention with nonconflict moves, the episode was shorter than when they began with conflict-continuation moves.

The high frequency of standoff outcomes, the low frequency of compromises, and the frequent use of distraction and conflict continuation moves raise the possibility that the use of rational problem solving (Blechman & McEnroe, 1985) in routine family conflict may be less important than the maintenance of family relationships and rules. It may be that therapeutic interventions that focus on family problem-solving techniques are of benefit not so much because they solve specific problems but because they clarify or redefine family roles and the rules for managing inevitable conflicts. In this vein, it is interesting that Gilbert et al. (1984) found that alliance patterns, particularly marital alliances, were weaker for distressed than nondistressed families. Other differences also seem likely. For example, it may be that more cross-generational alliances and interparental oppositions are found in distressed than nondistressed families. The TPICS could be used to test such hypotheses.

The descriptive approach taken in this study provides an overview of the various contributions of third parties to "dyadic" family conflicts. The study also has certain limitations, however. Research focused on hypothesis testing is needed to substantiate

some of the specific findings, particularly given the small sample size. Moreover, conflict may be influenced by factors that were not controlled here, such as family size, constellation, and the ages of the children and parents. In addition, the code scheme is limited in that affective tone and nonverbal communications were not included, and the content of the conflict was not taken into account. Although we believe the basic patterning of conflict is captured by the TPICS even without affective or content coding, this simplification may pose particular problems for studies that focus on individual differences.

While these points raise questions about the generality of some specific findings, they do not detract from the major points of this article. The present findings provide empirical justification for interest in the naturalistic intervention of third family members in dyadic family conflict. Moreover, a reliable system for coding such episodes of verbal conflict is described. We hope that the present report stimulates interest among other family researchers and suggest that investigators search widely in conceptualizing the issue. The analysis of the influence of third parties on dyadic conflict presents difficulties for a variety of disciplines in addition to family research. At one end of the spectrum, ethologists are grappling with the issue in attempts to explain the relation between dominance and affiliation (Chase, 1980). At the opposite extreme, political scientists have tried to address the problem in regard to international relations (Riker, 1967). Among developmental colleagues, those who are studying conflict among peers increasingly are concerned with triads (Dunn & Munn, 1986; Maynard, 1985; Shantz, 1987).

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