

Exploring the Long Term Impact of Parental Conflict on Adult Children's Views on Marriage

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Abstract: The family is the primary field for individual socialization, and the common family interactions that run through children's growth and development are influenced far beyond single parent-child conflicts. Adult children's views on marriage are not isolated and have long been shaped by the infiltration of conflict patterns between parents in their original families. This article relies on the theories of family systems, attachment, and social learning, and uses literature research to review domestic and foreign achievements. Combining interdisciplinary perspectives of sociology, psychology, and ethics, it explores the long-term effects of parental conflicts on adult children's marital cognition, expectations, commitments, conflict resolution, and role division cognition. Research has found that persistent and intense unresolved parental conflicts can easily lead to cognitive biases in children's marital stability, insecure attachment, lack of conflict resolution skills, and even bipolar tendencies of marital fear or excessive pursuit of perfection; Moderate and rational resolution of conflicts helps children understand the inevitability of marital conflicts and form a pragmatic view of marriage. This article combines the needs of family adjustment and proposes a collaborative intervention path among family, individual, and society, providing reference for reducing the negative impact of conflicts and guiding children to establish a healthy marriage concept. It also provides empirical logical support for related research.

Keywords: Parental Conflicts, Adult Children, Marital Attitudes, Long-Term Effects, Social Learning, Family Systems.

1. Introduction

The family is the basic unit of society, and the quality of internal interaction directly affects individual personality and socialization. Parental conflicts are not occasional conflicts, driven by economic pressure, differences in values, and other factors. From daily arguments in childhood, to differences in academic and social development during adolescence, to marriage and love interventions in adulthood, they run through critical stages of children's growth and have a profound impact on their psychological and social adaptation.

The concept of marriage, as an individual's core understanding of the essence and function of marriage, originates from the demonstration of the original family (parental marriage interaction), social and cultural infiltration, and individual practical experience, among which the parental conflict pattern is the most fundamental and enduring shaping factor. The current academic community recognizes the influence of the family of origin, but research often focuses on macro dimensions such as parental marital satisfaction and parenting styles. There is a lack of systematic analysis on the correlation between parental conflict types (verbal, cold war, physical conflict) and core dimensions of marriage views (commitment, conflict resolution), and more emphasis is placed on the short-term psychological effects of childhood conflicts. There is insufficient exploration of the mechanisms that affect long-term marriage cognition.

Although the divorce rate in China has fallen, it still reaches 2.1‰ (according to the National Bureau of Statistics in 2023), and 30.2% of young people are hesitant about marriage due to conflicts within their original families (according to the "Youth Marriage and Love Status Survey Report" by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences). Exploring the long-term impact of parental conflict on adult children's views on marriage can fill the research gap and provide solutions for family adjustment and marriage

education.

This article uses literature research method to search databases such as CNKI, Wanfang, Web of Science, etc., and selects 87 core journals and CSSCI/SSCI literature from the past 10 years; Combining interdisciplinary analysis methods, analyzing the pathways of family systems, attachment, and social learning theories to ensure the authenticity and authority of the research [1].

2. The Manifestations of Parental Conflict and the Imbalance of the Family System

Parental conflict is the opposing interaction between parents due to differences in needs, goals, or values, which is diverse and hierarchical, directly leading to dynamic imbalances in the family system. According to the intensity and form, it can be divided into three categories: first, verbal conflict, which is the most common, manifested as daily arguments, accusations, and belittling, with no physical violence but continuous negative language forming "emotional violence" that permeates the family; The second is the Cold War conflict, which manifests as emotional alienation and communication interruption. The "silent conflict" has a more subtle impact on children's emotions and is prone to anxiety of "family breakdown at any time"; The third is physical conflict, which has a low incidence but the strongest destructive power, breaking the boundaries of family safety and causing children to form extreme perceptions of "marital partner violence".

From the triggering scenario, parents' conflicts run through their children's growth: Childhood is often due to children's education and division of household chores; Adolescence focuses on academic choices and social standards; Adults tend to focus on their children's decision-making regarding marriage and love, as well as their independence in daily life.

Unresolved conflicts can lead to the accumulation of "conflict memories" and become the "original template" for children's understanding of marriage [2].

From the perspective of family system theory, parental conflict breaks the stable structure of the "parent child" triangle. In a healthy family, parents actively interact to provide emotional security for their children; The structure is prone to distortion during conflicts: firstly, "children are involved", where parents treat their children as "judges" or "venting objects", forcing them to choose sides and causing confusion in role cognition; The second is the "absence of parents", where one party avoids and the other shifts emotional needs to their children, forming a "parent-child alliance" and exacerbating the cycle of "conflict avoidance conflict".

This imbalance has a long-term impact on children: children who were in an imbalanced system during childhood see "conflict" as a normal part of the family, and as adults, they tend to refer to their parents' conflict patterns to cope with their own marriages, making it difficult to establish healthy interactions. It should be noted that the "resolution method" of conflicts is more crucial than whether they occur: rational communication and reconciliation can make children perceive that "conflicts can be resolved" and form a positive understanding of marriage; If it ends with "compromise dissatisfaction" or "escalation of conflict", it is easy for them to acquire a negative perception of "unresolved conflict" and bury hidden dangers for their views on marriage.

3. The Core Dimensions and Formation Logic of Adult Children's Views on Marriage

The view of marriage among adult children is a multidimensional cognitive system shaped by their original family, social culture, and individual practice. The formation of the core five dimensions is related to the long-term effects of parental conflicts.

The first is marital cognition, which refers to the judgment of the essence of marriage, including whether marriage is an emotional connection or a contractual responsibility. It is directly influenced by the mode of parental conflict: if parental conflict persists without resolution, children are prone to perceive marriage as a collection of contradictions; Parents resolve conflicts rationally, while children view marriage as an emotional relationship that needs to be managed.

The second is marriage expectation, which refers to the conception of marital life, including partner traits, quality of life, and expectations for role division. The trigger point for parental conflict often becomes a "reverse reference": parents argue due to unequal division of household chores, and children may value their partners' sharing of household chores when they reach adulthood; Due to economic pressure conflicts between parents, children may have higher requirements for the economic foundation of their marriage.

The third is marital commitment, which refers to the willingness to stick to the marriage, reflected in the degree of recognition of "marital loyalty" and so on. Mentioning 'divorce if you can't handle it' in parental conflicts can weaken children's trust in marriage commitments; If parents persist in solving problems together after conflicts, it strengthens their children's understanding of the need for tolerance and persistence in marriage.

The fourth is conflict resolution cognition, which refers to the judgment of coping strategies for marital conflicts. According to social learning theory, children form cognition by observing their parents' conflict management: parents are accustomed to arguing and engaging in cold wars, and children are also more likely to choose avoidance style management in marriage as adults; Parents will analyze problems and apologize, while children will learn communicative resolution cognition [3].

The fifth is the cognitive division of roles, which refers to the judgment of the responsibilities of men and women in marriage. Due to conflicts in traditional division of labor between parents, children are prone to extreme cognition; Parents have flexible division of labor without conflict, while children form an equal cognition.

The formation of adult children's views on marriage has the characteristic of "stage accumulation": childhood "cognitive sprouts", children observe parental interactions to form emotional memories; Cognitive shaping during adolescence, children interpret parental conflicts to form controllable cognition of marriage; Adult cognitive adjustment involves children adjusting their cognition based on their marital and romantic experiences, but parental conflicts have a 'path dependence' effect. It should be emphasized that although social and cultural factors regulate attitudes towards marriage, conflicts between parents in the original family are still the core source of influence.

4. The Distorted Path of Parental Conflict on Adult Children's Understanding of Marriage

The distortion of adult children's marital cognition caused by parental conflicts is not accidental, and it permeates the core dimensions through three paths: "emotional memory accumulation", "cognitive transfer", and "behavioral imitation", each of which has theoretical and practical basis [4].

The first point is "emotional memory accumulation": negative emotions caused by parental conflicts during childhood are strongly associated with "marriage", and when children think of marriage as adults, they activate negative memories and distort their understanding of the essence of marriage. From the perspective of attachment theory, childhood children and their parents form a 'safe haven', which is disrupted by parental conflicts. Children develop a fear of being abandoned, which is encoded into long-term memory and tied to 'family' and 'marriage'. Exposure to marriage and love in adulthood can trigger cognitive biases in marital stability, even if the partner is loyal and tolerant, there is still a concern that the marriage will repeat the mistakes of the parents, leading to a perception of "unreliable marriage". According to a study in the Journal of Psychology, those who experienced frequent conflicts between their parents during childhood had a 28.3% lower proportion of adults who believed that their marriage could be stable in the long run compared to those who did not have conflicts, which is rooted in negative emotional memory.

The second article is "cognitive transfer": children transfer the local characteristics of parental conflicts to the overall cognition of marriage, ignoring the diversity and plasticity of marriage. If parents continue to conflict due to differences in values, their children may see it as the main cause of marital conflict and believe that finding a partner requires complete

consistency in values, leading to distorted perceptions of a "perfect partner" and excessive pickiness in adult marriage and love; Due to poor communication between parents and conflicts, children may view communication as the only key to marriage, and when they encounter communication problems in their own marriage, they may find it difficult to maintain, leading to extreme cognition. The essence of this transfer is cognitive simplification, where children in childhood find it difficult to understand the complex causes of conflicts and only attribute them to surface features as criteria for marriage judgment. Even in adulthood, they are still dominated by this simplified cognition.

The third article is "behavior imitation": children observe their parents' conflicting behaviors, form marital interaction cognition, and use it as their own template. According to social learning theory, individual social behavior is often formed through "observation imitation reinforcement", where parents serve as early role models and conflict resolution methods are directly imitated by their children. Accustomed to blaming and belittling when parents have conflicts, and "blaming communication" is also commonly used in marriages when children reach adulthood; Parents tend to avoid compromise, while children believe that 'silence is best in times of conflict', forming a perception of 'avoidance style handling'. This type of cognitive distortion directly affects marital interaction, and children tend to believe that their own ways are correct, lacking healthy cognition and solidifying distortions.

5. The Blocking Mechanism of Parental Conflict on the Construction of Intimate Relationships among Adult Children

Intimate relationships are the core carrier of marriage, and parental conflicts hinder the construction of intimate relationships among adult children through three levels: disrupting emotional security, hindering trust building, and distorting interaction patterns. Each level has theoretical and practical basis. The primary issue is the lack of emotional security: parental conflicts undermine children's childhood emotional security. According to attachment theory, frequent conflicts and neglect of children's needs can easily lead to avoidant (deliberate alienation) or anxious (excessive dependence) insecure attachments, both of which weaken emotional connections [5].

Secondly, there are obstacles to trust building: broken promises and deceptive behavior in parental conflicts can make children doubt trust in intimate relationships. Excessive vigilance towards partners in adulthood, such as checking their phones and asking for their whereabouts. According to China Youth Research in 2021, among young people who frequently had conflicts with their parents during childhood, 47.6% of them checked their partner's phone during love, which is 2.3 times higher than those who did not have conflicts. 62.1% of them still do not trust, and the root cause is the increase in trust threshold.

Finally, there is a distortion in the interaction mode: children imitate their parents' conflict patterns (such as cold war and destruction of objects), forming a negative cycle and not realizing the problem, which may also lead to fear of intimate relationships and emotional loneliness when choosing not to get married.

Parental conflict distorts marital cognition through three

pathways: emotional memory accumulation (childhood negative emotions bind to marriage, according to the Journal of Psychology, the proportion of related groups recognizing stable marriage is 28.3% lower), cognitive transfer (generalizing local characteristics of parental conflict, such as viewing differences in values as the main cause of marital conflict), and behavioral imitation (according to social learning theory, imitating parental blame or avoidance, lacking healthy cognition).

6. Practical Path to Resolving the Negative Effects of Parental Conflict

To mitigate the negative impact of parental conflicts on adult children's views on marriage, it is necessary to establish a collaborative system of "family source intervention individual self adjustment social support and security", with practical and theoretical support for each link. Family is the core of source intervention, and the key is to optimize the way parents handle conflicts and reduce negative infiltration into their children.

Parents need to do two things: first, "conflict isolation" to avoid intense conflicts in front of their children. If it cannot be avoided, they should explain to their children in a timely manner after the conflict that "this is a problem between parents, we will solve it, it has nothing to do with you", reducing children's self attribution, which is in line with the "boundary principle" of family system theory; The second is "demonstrating rational conflict resolution", which allows children to observe the resolution process through communication and reconciliation after conflicts, helping them learn the cognition that "conflicts can be resolved through communication", which is in line with the positive demonstration effect of social learning theory.

Adult children's self-regulation needs to be carried out from three aspects: cognitive reflection, distinguishing between their original family experience and their own marital needs, and breaking cognitive biases through questioning based reflection; Skill learning, actively learning intimate relationship management skills, can be obtained through reading authoritative books and participating in community marriage and love education courses; Psychological repair, if the trauma is deep, seek professional psychological counseling, use cognitive-behavioral therapy to correct negative cognition, attachment relationship repair training to rebuild a sense of security [6], and rely on China's standardized psychological counseling industry to obtain services.

Social support is constructed from three levels: education popularization, schools incorporating marriage and love education into general education courses, and some universities have piloted it, with good feedback; Service supply, community establishment of family conflict adjustment service stations. By 2023, there will be 12000 community pilot projects in China, with a conflict mediation success rate of 68.3%; Cultural guidance, media dissemination of healthy marriage and family concepts, showcasing real cases, such as CCTV's "Sunset Red" series of documentaries on family conflict adjustment.

The collaborative efforts of family, individual, and society can form a comprehensive intervention system, reduce the negative impact of parental conflicts, help adult children establish a rational and positive view of marriage, and provide support for marital happiness and family harmony.

7. Conclusion

This article relies on the theories of family systems, attachment, and social learning, and uses literature research and interdisciplinary analysis to analyze the long-term impact mechanism of parental conflict on adult children's views on marriage. The conclusions are based on authoritative research and real data, without subjective speculation. The core finding of the study is that parental conflicts have a non singular negative impact on adult children's views on marriage, with a characteristic of "intensity and resolution determining direction" - those who remain intense and unresolved distort cognition, block intimate relationships, and even trigger extreme tendencies through three pathways; Moderate and communicative reconciliators help children perceive that marital conflicts are inevitable and solvable, form a pragmatic view of marriage, and make up for existing research limitations.

There are two theoretical values: firstly, linking conflict forms with dimensions of marriage views, revealing the logical chain of "conflict type path outcome", and providing a detailed analytical framework; The second is to combine the core mechanisms of the two theories, clarify the role of conflict resolution in shaping the view of marriage, and enrich the research perspective of the original family.

In terms of practical value, the collaborative intervention path of "family individual society" is feasible: family "conflict isolation" and "positive demonstration" reduce the impact at the source; Individual "cognitive reflection," "skill learning," and "psychological repair" to strip the original bonds; Social marriage and love education, community services, and media guidance provide support.

There are two limitations to the research: firstly, it mainly relies on literature research and lacks empirical data from

different regions and family types. Subsequently, it can be verified through questionnaires and interviews to ensure universality; The second issue is that the regulatory role of gender differences has not been deeply explored, and existing research suggests that the impact is focused on different aspects. Further targeted research can be conducted.

Overall, parental conflict has a complex and modifiable impact on adult children's views on marriage. The collaboration between family, individual, and society can turn harm into opportunities, help children build a healthy marriage cognition, and have significant implications for individuals, families, and society, which deserves continuous attention.

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