

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 216 280

CG 015 894

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TITLE Patterns of Verbal Communication in Strong Families.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Mental Health (DHHS), Bethesda, Md.
PUB DATE Aug 81
GRANT NIMH-RO1-MH-29944
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (89th, Los Angeles, CA, August 24-26, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Child Abuse; Child Development; Communication (Thought Transfer); Comparative Analysis; Family Environment; *Family Relationship; *Family Structure; *Females; *Individual Development; Interaction; Models; Program Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *Anorexia Nervosa; *Individuation

ABSTRACT

This paper describes an ongoing project on the nature and effects of family structure and family interaction. The research presented involves the study of normal families, emphasizing the effects of system-level variables on the development of children within the family. A theoretical model is provided which focuses on the individuation process, i.e., the development of the individual within the family setting, and the way in which comfort with difference, accuracy of interpersonal perception, mutual validation and active discussion of opinions among family members contribute to and are affected by the personal development and functioning of individual family members. These system-level variables are examined as they are revealed in patterns of conversational interaction. Data collection from families with normal adolescent daughters, families of daughters with anorexia nervosa, and families with a history of child abuse is described and the development of a coding scheme to facilitate the microanalysis of the process of interaction is discussed. Analyses of differences among identifiable subsamples of the normal population are reported, as are comparisons involving the anorexic group and a subsample of the abuse group. The ability of the model to distinguish between strong and weak families within a normal population, as well as between normal and clinical populations, is also examined. (Author/NRB)

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Patterns of Verbal Communication
in Strong Families

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Prepared for presentation at meetings of the American Psychological Association, Los Angeles, August, 1981.

CG 015894

This research has been supported by research grants from the National Institute of Mental Health (ROI MH29944). The authors would like to thank Larry Feldman of the Chicago Family Institute for his encouragement at the outset of the project; Lena Ericksen, who helped design the study and interview families; and Connie Cornwell, who helped create the coding scheme and train coders, and who has served as project administrator for the past three years. We would also like to thank the more than 30 individuals who have worked as interviewers, coders or research assistants throughout the project, especially Katy Billups, Kathy Dunker, Sheila Jones, Gayle McAdoo, Louis Morello, Cathy Penn, Ruby Ross, Susan Speight, Judy Svegliato, Norma Tejada, Janet Thompson, Annette Ward, Glenda Warren, and Annette Woods.

Patterns of Verbal Communication
in Strong Families

This paper reports on an ongoing series of studies on the nature and effects of family structure and family interaction. The project started in 1974 with a commitment to four primary goals:

1. To study a population of normal (i.e., unlabeled) families;
2. To conceptualize and measure system-level variables to describe family structure and process;
3. To develop microanalytic measures of interaction process to operationalize family variables; and
4. To study the relationship between family process and child development.

Theoretical Model

The model underlying most of this research focuses on family individuation and the relationship between family individuation and the individual development and functioning of family members, especially children.

Our understanding of this process is grounded in the work of a number of family theorists, including Bowen (7,8), Karpel (11), Laing (14), Minuchin (18,19), Boszormenyi-Nagy (9), Skynner (23), and Wynne (24). The contributions of Kohut (12,13) and Mahler (17) in the area of the development of self concepts have also been important to our understanding of this

process.

A simplified model of the individuation process as we conceive it is given in Figure 1. The theoretical variables are Individual Development, Comfort with Difference, Accuracy of Interpersonal Perception, Mutual Validation, and Active Communication of Opinion. Although our research focuses on the child's development as an end product of the family system, our model is written more generally in recognition of the fact that both children and parents contribute to the creation and maintenance of the system and that the individual functioning and development of all family members are affected by their family system.

We think of Individual Development primarily in terms of personal security, self awareness and self efficacy. Self awareness and self acceptance tend to be associated with other awareness and other acceptance. When one feels personally secure, there is less need for others to be or act in a particular way in order to bolster a shaky self image. Thus there is greater tolerance for the unexpected and the unique in interpersonal interaction; one is less threatened by finding that others are different from what one had expected or hoped for. We call this tolerance Comfort with Difference.

When one is comfortable with difference, there is less of a tendency for one's perception of the other to be distorted by one's unmet needs; there is less that is unwanted or unaccepted in oneself that will be dealt with through projection. The more comfortable one is with unexpected differences in others, the less need there is to misperceive others as having identical thoughts and feelings, or as being whatever it is one needs them to be in order to protect one's own sense of security. Thus,

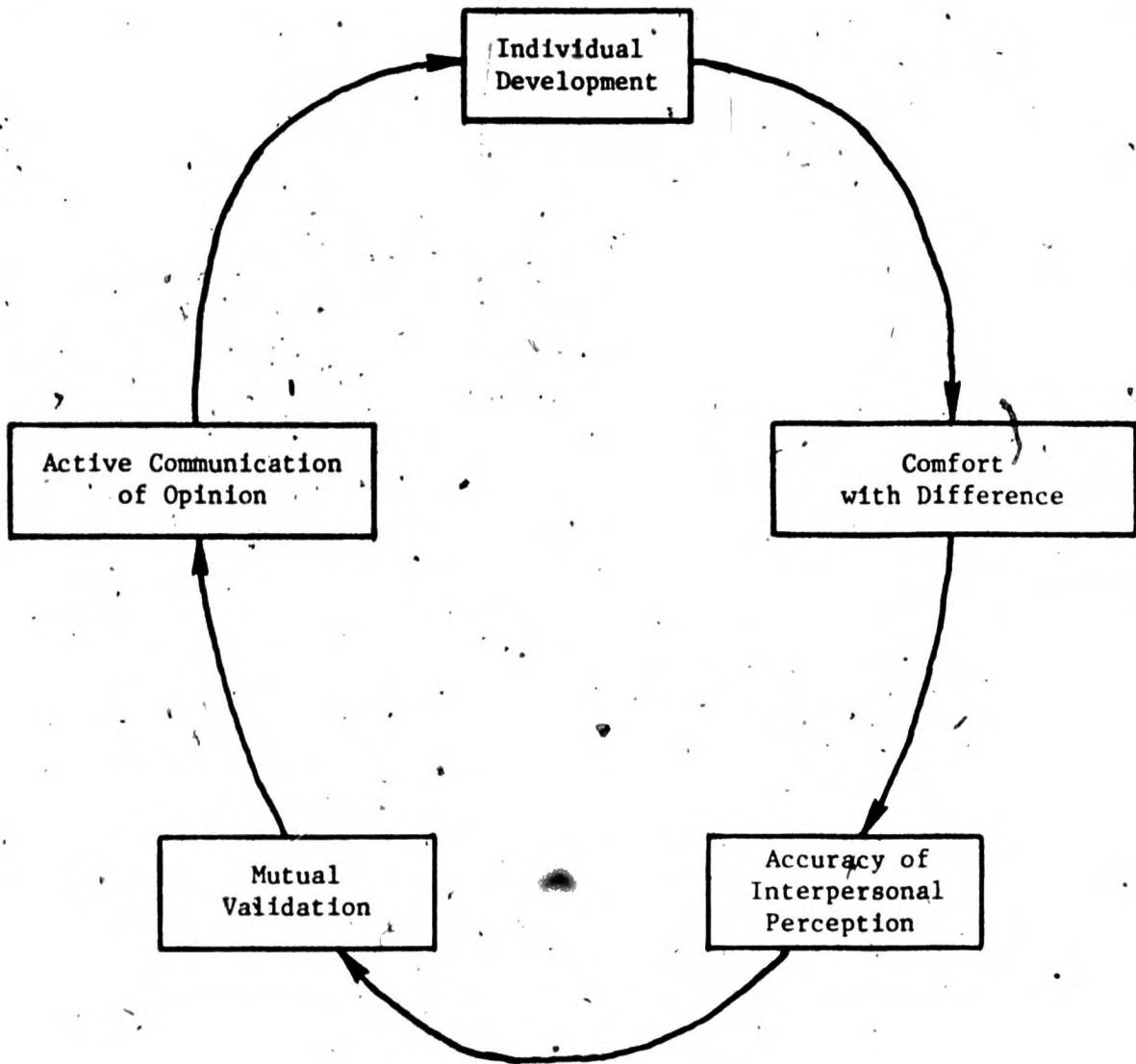


Figure 1. A Simplified Model of the Individuation Process

the greater one's Accuracy of Interpersonal Perception.

Accuracy of Interpersonal Perception directly contributes to the ability of individuals in the relationship to carry on a mutually satisfying and mutually validating relationship. This is because one's ability to provide the other with understanding and to meet the other's needs depends on one's ability to receive the other's communication accurately and to perceive accurately the other's need. Thus greater Accuracy of Interpersonal Perception is likely to lead to a greater degree of Mutual Validation. By validation is meant the ability to acknowledge the other, to communicate in effect, "I heard what you said; what you are saying makes sense to me." Validation also involves responding to the other, saying in effect, "What you are doing and saying has a specific effect on me; here is how I react."

Receiving validation from the other, one feels comfortable in the relationship. When one knows that the other will listen openly and respond meaningfully, one is more inclined to communicate fully. Active communication of Opinion is also enhanced by a sense of mutual support, connectedness and intimacy that often results from mutual validation. The Active Communication of Opinion increases one's sense of personal security by letting one know where one stands. The increase in information improves one's self awareness by the simple increase in feedback one receives. And one's sense of self efficacy increases by the observation of the effects of one's behavior on the other.

The cycle can also be described negatively. Individuals feeling personally insecure, unable to acknowledge or accept important aspects of the self, are more likely to feel uncomfortable with the inevitable

differences that emerge in all interpersonal relationships. The lack of Comfort with Difference makes one more likely to perceive others through heavily clouded glasses. For such persons, the strong push of own needs and fear of contradiction leads to selective attention to the traits of others, and thus to less Accuracy of Interpersonal Perception. Less accuracy in perceiving the other, in receiving the other's communication, means less ability to respond appropriately to the other's needs. Failure to receive appropriate response is disappointing and is detrimental to one's willingness to expose oneself to potential criticism by expressing one's opinions. The lack of Active Communication of Opinion increases one's uncertainty and increases the probability of misunderstanding. Mutual invalidation and mutual misunderstanding inhibit the development of a sense of closeness or mutual support in the relationship, do not provide accurate information about the self, and thus decrease each individual's self awareness, sense of security, and self efficacy.

The theoretical variables in our model are, of course, also influenced by a number of factors not considered here. Likewise, there are more complex relationships between the variables in the model than those described here. A more complete description of the individuation process, including a discussion of the subjective experience of that process for individuals involved in relationships at various levels of individuation, is provided in Bell et al. (5). For a more detailed description of the research project, and for additional results of data analyses comparing optimal and average families within the normal population, see papers by Bell and Bell (1,4).

Hypotheses

The model of the individuation process given in Figure 1 makes specific predictions about relationships between the theoretical variables depicted. In this paper we will examine the relationship between Individual Development and three other variables: Comfort with Difference, Mutual Validation, and Active Communication of Opinion.

Because we view the family as a system, the theoretical model in Figure 1 describes the relationships among all family members. The level of Individual Development of parents and children is seen as a product of the individuation process operating over many years. This process should be reflected in both marital and family interactions. In the first of our analyses, we approach Individual Development as it is manifest in the development of adolescent daughters in normal (unlabeled) families. Two other analyses compare clinical samples with matched controls. These samples are drawn from populations of families with daughters showing symptoms of anorexia nervosa and of families with a history of child abuse.

We view family individuation as a basic family system process and expect that lower levels of individuation will contribute to, or be associated with, a wide range of family dysfunctions and family-influenced individual pathologies. Within a normal population, we expect that highly individuated families will provide a better environment for individual development and that this will be reflected, in our study, in the functioning of the adolescent daughter in the family.

Family therapists and theorists who have worked with families containing an anorexic daughter, have noted common family system properties

in these families (20,22). One of these dynamics is the denial of the anorexic daughter's individuality. Through covert control, the family seems to mold the daughter into the person they need her to be, perhaps in order to sustain a dysfunctional marital relationship. The symptom of anorexia is often described as the daughter's way of establishing some autonomy -- some control over her own life. In such a family, one could expect to find a general discomfort with, and denial of, individuality, with accompanying lack of mutual validation and restricted sharing of concerns and feelings.

The individuation process may also help to illuminate the family dynamics that contribute to child abuse. It has been argued (10) that couples involved in child abuse constitute an enmeshed marital system in which deeply felt needs for nurturance on the part of each spouse lead to unrealistic expectations of parenting from the mate. When these expectations are frustrated, a parent may turn to a child for this nurturance. Child abuse has been hypothesized to occur when this unrealistic expectation is not met.

METHOD

The bulk of our data were collected through home interviews with white, middle class families in suburban Illinois. The sample consists of the families of 100 adolescent girls recruited through local high schools; there was no reported history of delinquency or mental illness in any of the Illinois families. Each family contained an adolescent daughter, age 16-17, and had two or three children all of whom were

children of the present marriage. We also have data from four families containing a daughter with anorexia nervosa (also a middle class sample), and data from about 25 couples (and 25 matched controls) with a history of child abuse. The child abuse couples are part of a project we are working on with Blair and Rita Justice, funded by the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health. Some of these data are still being collected. The abuse sample consists of families residing in cities and towns in Texas, and are of a lower socioeconomic status than the Illinois sample.

This paper will report analyses of differences among identifiable subsamples of the normal population, comparing the marital interaction of parents of adolescent girls who scored relatively high on a number of psychological and sociometric measures with the marital interaction of parents of adolescent girls who scored relatively low on these measures (N = 15 in each group). We will also report comparisons from the anorexic group (four families with an anorexic daughter and 13 matched controls) and for a subsample (11 abuse couples with 11 matched controls) of the abuse data.

Revealed Difference Exercise

The data analyzed here were collected in a structure interview held in the family's home. After the family members had given their written permission for the interview, they completed a 63-item True-False questionnaire about their family. This questionnaire was a shortened version of the Moos Family Environment Scale (21). The questionnaire provided the basis for a revealed difference exercise for the marital couple. In this exercise, the spouses were asked to consider items on

the questionnaire on which they had disagreed, and to try to reach a consensus. They were given 6-10 slips of paper in an envelope. Each piece of paper listed an item from the questionnaire and the answers of each person. They were asked to discuss the item and try to reach an agreement, then mark whether the agreement was true or false -- or that they still did not agree. Twenty minutes were available for this exercise. Other parts of the interview, including a family revealed difference exercise and a family projective self-description (3) will be discussed in future work.

Interaction Process Coding Scheme

Because of the complexity and subtlety of the individuation process, it became apparent that our coding scheme for describing the interaction process had to be complex and subtle. An early coding effort (6) showed that an effort to capture the interaction process with a single scale was inadequate. As a result we developed a coding scheme consisting of five major scales with some 77 categories. In spite of the complexity of this scale, we have maintained intercoder reliabilities ranging from 71 to 92 percent agreement among coders for each scale.

The Interaction Process Coding Scheme (2) codes speech divided into the smallest units we find interpersonally meaningful: often clauses, but equally often phrases and single words and sounds. For each such speech unit, we code not only the content of the communication, but also its function in the interaction. The Topic scale codes the function of each speech unit: e.g., interruptions and floor control, hesitancy and task avoidance, giving information and stating a position. The Orientation

scale describes the form of the speech unit: i.e., question, request, or assertion -- and whether the speaker defines the assertion as a perception or as a fact. The Focus scale describes the object of the speech unit: whether a behavior, feeling or idea is being discussed, and whose behavior, feeling or idea (the speaker's or another person's). The Support scale describes the quality of the affective relationship: positive, negative, sad, anxious. The Acknowledgement scale codes each statement in terms of its interpersonal function: when one person speaks, does the other acknowledge and legitimate the contribution, ignore it, or undermine it? The coding scheme is available from the authors.

Measurement

Four of the five variables in Figure 1 have been measured in this study. Individual Development is measured on one adolescent girl in each family. Comfort with Difference, Active Communication of Opinion, and Mutual Validation are measured on husband-wife interaction during a revealed difference exercise.

The Individual Development of the adolescent girl in each family is a combined measure based on a number of psychological and sociometric instruments. These are four scales of the California Psychological Inventory (sociability, socialization, self awareness and self control), Loewinger's measure of ego development (15,16), and a sociometric measure looking at popularity and mutuality of friendship choices. From our sample of 100 adolescent girls and their families, we selected the 15 girls with the highest Individual Development scores as our "high normal" group and the 15 girls with the lowest scores as our "low normal" group.

Three of the theoretical variables of Figure 1 are measured from the interactions of the parents in each of these families (future work will focus on interactions among all family members; this coding is not yet complete). Comfort with Difference is measured by four variables in the coding scheme. Two variables reflect the content of communication when one is uncomfortable with difference and disagreement: continuing to discuss an item after agreement has been reached (reflecting a hesitancy to go on to the next item) and denial of responsibility for the disagreement (arguing that "We don't really disagree," or that "It's all a matter of interpretation"). In addition to the content of speech indicating one's lack of Comfort with Difference, we identified two aspects of speech style that reflect discomfort: hemming and hawing (the "uh" and "well" in "I . . . uh . . . well . . . I . . . uh . . . want to say . . . uh . . . that . . .") and frequent use of the backchannel (encouraging the other to continue to speak). Standard scores on these variables are computed for each spouse and then a combined Comfort with Difference score is computed for the couple. This procedure is also used to compute scores on the remaining two variables.

Active Communication of Opinion is measured by three interaction variables. In terms of the content of speech, active communication involves the clear statement of one's own position on the item under discussion. Stylistically, one's active involvement in the communication process is indicated by the frequency of interruptions (when one person's speech unit begins before the other's unit has been completed) and overlaps (when both speakers begin their speech units simultaneously).

Four interaction variables are used to measure Mutual Validation.

Asking questions and verbally (or by silence) offering the floor to the other are seen as supporting the validity of the other's participation in the communication process. Similarly, responding to the intent of the other's speech (answering a question or responding meaningfully to the other's assertion) is validating, while failing to respond to the other's speech is seen as invalidating.

RESULTS

The results of data analyses are given in Figure 2. Values are given as standard scores adjusted for the means and standard deviations of the Illinois sample. Thus care should be exercised when comparing the abuse results with those of the normal and anorexic groups because of class and subcultural differences between the Illinois and Texas samples.

According to our model of the individuation process, higher levels of Individual Development should be associated with higher levels of Comfort with Difference, Active Communication of Opinion, and Mutual Validation. These comparisons are given in Figure 2. Looking at differences within the normal population, two of the comparisons are in the predicted direction, although only Mutual Validation is significant at the .05 level by a directional t-test. The difference for husbands on Active Communication of Opinion approaches significance ($p < .07$, one-tailed); there is no difference for the wives on this variable. That this level of confirmation has been achieved may be considered remarkable considering that the interaction process variables are measured over the conversations of the parents, while Individual Development is measured on an adolescent

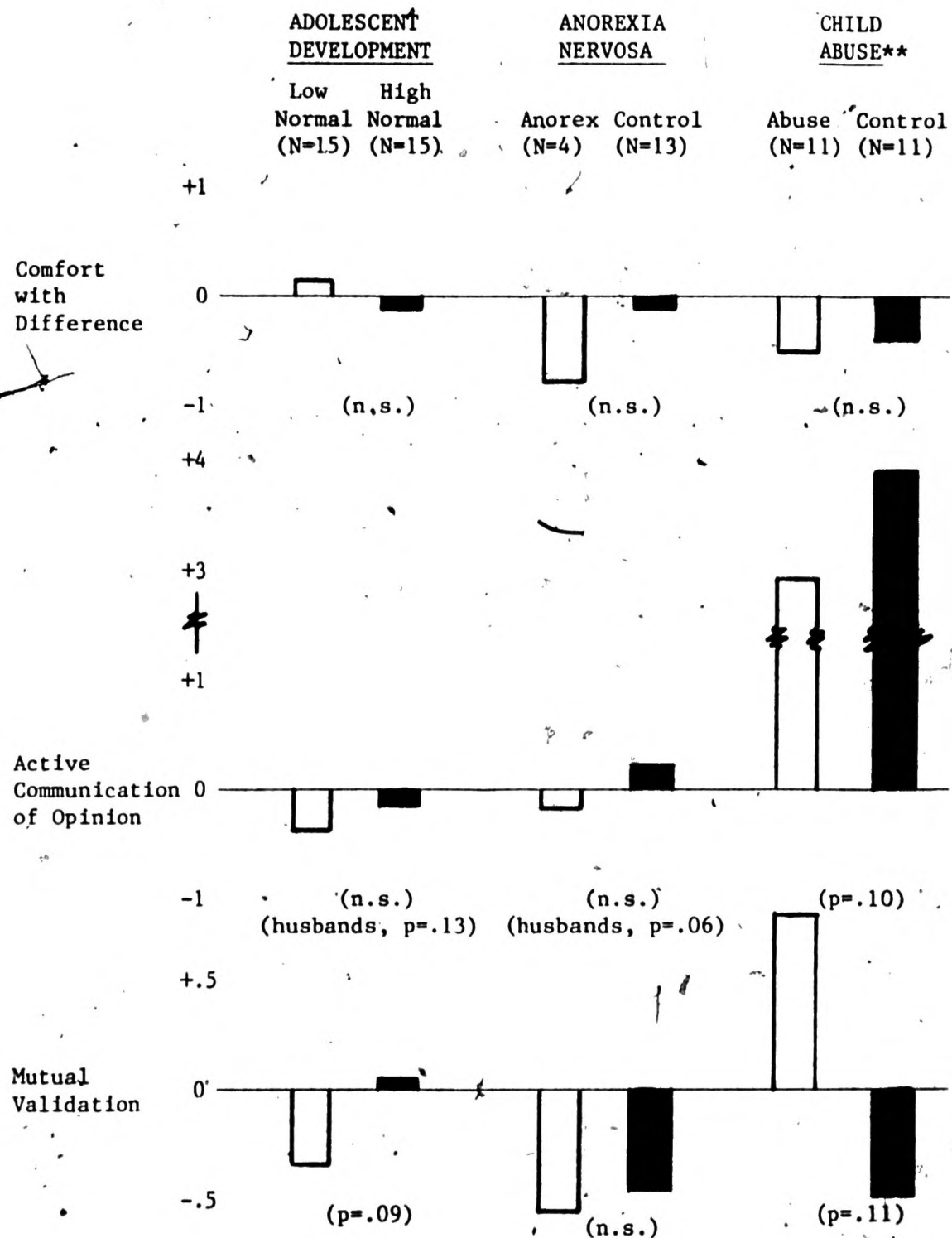


Figure 2. Comparisons among Groups on Three Theoretical Variables*

* Means are graphed as standard scores relative to 93 "normal" middle class (Illinois) couples. All p values reflect 2-tailed comparisons.

** This is a lower class (Texas) sample.

girl in the family. Future analysis of interaction process among all family members may be expected to provide stronger support for the model.

Comparisons involving a sample of four families of anorexic girls and 13 matched control families are all in the predicted direction, but these differences are not statistically significant. Again, however, there is a significant difference in the predicted direction for Active Communication of Opinion by husbands only ($p < .03$). These results are suggestive of the importance of the individuation process in families of anorexics, but a larger sample size is needed to assure reliability.

Looking at the data from the child abuse study, two of the three comparisons are in the predicted direction and are thus supportive of a higher level of individuation in the control families than in the families with incidence of child abuse. Active Communication of Opinion shows a significant difference in the predicted direction ($p < .05$ for the directional t-test). The third variable, Mutual Validation, shows a large difference opposite to the predicted direction. Results from other analyses suggest that abuse couples are also more verbally supportive and less verbally assertive than control couples.¹ We may speculate that the abnormally high level of Mutual Validation in the abusive couples reflects an inability to discuss differences in a non-defensive, rational way. Thus feelings which cannot be verbally expressed are acted out instead, leading to the child abuse that characterizes these families.

DISCUSSION

The results reported in this paper should be taken as preliminary, primarily because the sample sizes are small and represent only a part of the total data base. The results, however, do support the usefulness of the interaction coding scheme and of the model of the individuation process whose theoretical variables it was called upon to measure. Of the three theoretical variables operationalized by the coding scheme, only Comfort with Difference resulted in no significant differences between groups. This may reflect a weakness of the model, or it may be that this variable, being a description of an internal state rather than a description of behavior (as are Mutual Validation and Active Communication of Opinion) is less readily measured from interaction process.

Some interesting substantive issues are raised by the results of these analyses. The model seems to provide a useful tool for studying normal families, as well as for clarifying family dynamics for clinical populations. Differences were found in the marital interaction patterns of couples within a normal population -- couples selected on the basis of the Individual Development of one of their adolescent children. These results support the basic interconnectedness of the various subsystems (marital, family, parent-child) of the family. Also, we find that variables representing the various stages of the individuation process tend to vary consistently: when one variable takes on a high value in a sample, the other variables tend to take on high values. The consistency of the individuation process may break down, however, in the abuse group, where spouses with a history of child abuse score unexpectedly high on

Mutual Validation relative to control spouses. This finding was discussed in terms of the relationship between verbal and physical aggression.

Future analyses. We feel that we have developed a rich data base -- to explore marital and family system dynamics, and the relationship of these dynamics to the development and functioning of individual family members. The immediate work of the research project will focus on more complete analyses of the marital interaction data. Substantively, this will involve study of interaction process correlates of ego development, socioeconomic status, and marital satisfaction. Also, we will be exploring the nature of power in the marital relationship. One of our interests is to examine the stimulus-response patterns of discussion partners and the changes in these patterns over time. When the coding and processing of the family interaction data are completed, we will be studying the relationship between marital and family systems, as well as the effect of both family climate and the particular role of the individual in the family system on that individual's development and functioning.

FOOTNOTES

Results of a factor analysis of the coding scheme include two interpersonal factors -- one which seems to reflect supportiveness, the other assertiveness. What is particularly interesting about these factors is that, in each case, both extremes appear to be dysfunctional. Positive support is associated with anxiety and hesitancy to present own ideas, negative support with sadness. The positive pole on the assertiveness factor involves dogmatic assertions of fact. The negative pole involves a deflection of potential confrontation by polite social talk, hesitancy to discuss disagreement and distractions. It is probably the case that, for many dimensions of interpersonal interaction, extreme behavior, in either direction, may reflect an inappropriate or dysfunctional adaptation.

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