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Socializing the Silent Treatment: Parent and Adult Child Communicated Displeasure, Identification, and Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Responding to evidence that the silent treatment is a relational-harming means of communicating disappointment in interpersonal relationships, this study focused on the silent treatment's role and transmission within the family. Adult children's ($N = 182$) self-reported silent-treatment behaviors were negatively related to their own self-esteem, and the satisfaction they reported for their primary parent was negatively related to that parent's silent treatment. The parent's admitting displeasure, however, was positively related to this satisfaction and positively associated with the child's feelings of control. Revealed sex differences were minor and outside of gendered expectations for communicating disappointment. In testing parent socialization of the silent treatment, parent silent-treatment use was positively associated with the adult child's silent-treatment use, with no demonstrated mediation by parent identification.

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Feelings of displeasure are inescapable in close relationships, even those that are highly rewarding. Means of communicating this displeasure are quite consequential (Williams, 2001). Relationships can be sustained and possibly enhanced by partners warmly and openly discussing their discontent, yet negativity is often exacerbated by expressing negative feelings with hostility or by avoiding direct discussion of the irksome issue (Caughlin & Scott, 2010). The overt, negative displays of distaste are well documented as ineffective and harmful (Schrodt, Witt, & Shimkowski, 2014), but the covert displays are also problematic (Sommer, Williams, Ciarocco, & Baumeister, 2001), and beg to be further assessed. A covert behavior at the crux of this study is the silent treatment, which is the strategic enactment of aloofness, avoidance, and dismissive behaviors that discomfort and frustrate recipients (Williams, 2001).

In this study, we address the presence, consequence, and transmittance of covert *and* overt means of letting loved ones know we are displeased with them. Alongside young people's use of overt and covert grievances, we assess the following three realms. First, as self-esteem has been linked to silent-treatment use (Sommer et al., 2001), we replicate this trend and introduce tolerance for disagreement as a quality that might decrease the displeased party's propensity for overt tactics. Second, addressing links to relationship quality, we consider how the displeased party's grievance expressions correspond with receiver's feelings of control and satisfaction within the relationship. Finally, given that parents transmit ideas and habits for communicating in conflict (e.g. Cui & Fincham, 2010), we test the modeling/compensation hypothesis's (Floyd & Morman, 2000) utility in explaining intergenerational transmission of the silent treatment. Ultimately, our results might offer avenues for helping families and romantic partners to effectively engage in relationship-enhancing grievance expressions.

Overt and covert communication of displeasure

Certainly, being upset with someone need not translate to conflict, but the conflict literature usefully demonstrates that when we actively attend to the things that make us upset in our relationships, we have a greater chance of sustaining and improving individual and relational well-being. Though we heed Sillars and Canary's warning against conceiving of conflict behaviors as purely constructive or destructive (Sillars & Canary, 2013), researchers have identified several behaviors that lead to relationship enhancement. Among these are empathically listening, collaborating to resolve problems, and/or collectively working to accept unresolvable issues (Driver, Tabares, Shapiro, & Gottman, 2012). Love matters as well. Not only does expressed love lend itself to heightened constructive conflict behaviors (Gonzaga, Keltner, Londahl, & Smith, 2001), but inserting affection into an argument is shown to break the tension among romantic couples (Driver et al., 2012). In addition to warmly attending to both parties' interests, all of these constructive strategies require one to admit being upset.

Withholding negative feelings is a form of destructive conflict that is covert (Sillars & Canary, 2013). The harm of suppressed negative feelings can come from its ultimate breaking point, in which communication becomes direct, and is often unkind (Sillars & Canary, 2013). The hurt can also come from the withholding itself. Even before (or in the absence of) an emotional explosion, displeasure manifests in intimate interactions as denial ("I'm fine!") or disengagement, both of which hurt receivers and keep the conflict from becoming collaborative and productive (Roberts, 2000). By definition, the silent treatment is driven by the sender's desire to make the recipient uncertain as to where he or she stands in the mind of the sender (Williams, 2001), thus making the silent treatment more problematic than some overt forms of grievance expression.

Silent-treatment use and sender characteristics

First conceptualized by Falbo and Peplau in their typology of power assertion in romantic relationships, the silent treatment is purposeful in its avoidance (1980). Buss describes it as a manipulative tactic because of its frustrating uncertainty induction (1992). The silent treatment's "strategic ambiguity" – a label given by Williams (2001) – refers to the purposeful omission of contextual clues allowing for multiple interpretations of a message (Eisenberg, 1984). Addressing how strategic ambiguity was used to include or exclude organization members, Eisenberg identified this tactic as a means of further out-grouping those whom did not understand the in-group's "correct interpretation" of the message (p. 234). Pulled into the interpersonal realm, the exclusionary function is used by the silent-treatment enactor, similarly alienating and frustrating its recipient (Williams, 2001). Among the many dimensions of ambiguity, the receiver could wonder *if* the sender is truly upset and *why* they are upset. In documented accounts of long-lasting silence among intimate partners, the receiver feels great pain (Williams, 2001). Though it occurred only in the privacy of their home, an account of a husband's long-term (over 40 years) silent treatment toward his wife seems similarly severe to a criminal being formally ostracized from their community (Williams, 2001).

Silent-treatment enactors may be somewhat idiosyncratic in their methods, but the silent treatment is commonly displayed as aloofness and avoiding direct confrontation (Williams, 2001). Behavior shifts include reduced eye contact and ignoring the receiver's comments or actions (Williams, 2001). This kind of treatment leads to frustration for the receiver, who often terminates the relationship (Sommer et al., 2001). Reasoning, then, that those interested in keeping their romantic partners would wisely refrain from enacting this behavior, Wright and Roloff tested and successfully found a negative relationship between commitment and silent-treatment use (2009).

While the silent treatment may be used as a manipulation tactic to change or end a relationship, it is also enacted to (simply) change another person's behaviors (Williams, 2001). Despite or because of its potential to move relationships toward dissolution, the silent treatment's power may make it alluring. Those who report its use also report a stronger sense of control (Williams, Shore, & Grahe, 1998). Zadro, Williams, and Richardson's role-play experiment among strangers revealed that sender needs were better met through

more aloof and quiet strategies, as opposed to direct arguments (2005). This suggests how the silent treatment may be used for the purpose of heightening one's position. Even though intimate partners likely have different needs than those communicating with strangers, it would be naïve to assume that romantic partners and family members never desire power over the other person. Juxtaposed to a power play, the strategically ambiguous act of staying silent might be done to avoid a direct argument. If this is true, we would expect its lessened use by those comfortable with interpersonal disagreements.

Tolerance for disagreement and self-esteem

Conflict avoidance is paramount, and many idealize romantic relationships and family relationships as being low or even absent in conflict (Miller, Niehuis, & Huston, 2006). "Mind reading," the process of knowing what someone is thinking or needing without a verbal directive, is a characteristic that people desire from their partners and family members (Caughlin, 2003), and that precludes some people's silent treatment use (Wright & Roloff, 2015). While neither mind reading, nor general idealization are destined to negatively impact relationships (for instance, idealization is linked to marital satisfaction; Miller et al., 2006), these misperceptions might drive idealizers to be intolerant of conflict. Assuming they will seldom have to directly address their negative feelings, a conflict-intolerant individual may turn to the silent treatment.

Tolerance for disagreement is the degree to which one acknowledges that differences of opinion exist within relationships, and thus require discussion (Teven, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1998). The construct arose as a means of appealing to undergraduate students' propensity to view conflict as competitive and harmful (hence the originators' replacement of this for the term "disagreement" so as to trigger fewer negative sentiments). Assessments of this construct ultimately showed that those high in tolerance for disagreement were also higher in argumentativeness and lower in verbal aggression (Teven et al., 1998). As this trait seems to coincide with greater eagerness to openly resolve problems through discussion, we predict those high in tolerance for disagreement will be less likely to use the silent treatment. These individuals also tend to have high self-esteem (Teven et al., 1998), a variable also known to coincide with *infrequent* silent-treatment use.

For adolescents and adult children, self-esteem decreases from engagement in (Caughlin & Malis, 2004), and observance of unhealthy and/or unproductive patterns of conflict avoidance (Amato, 1986; Guo, Tian, & Huebner, 2018). For senders, a lack of openness about negative feelings leads to a weakening of self-esteem that can produce anxious thinking (Guo et al., 2018) or unhealthy health practices (Caughlin & Malis, 2004). When engaged in demand/withdraw patterns with their parents (discussed further in the next section), adolescents had lessened self-esteem when *either* they or their parent were the ones to withdraw (Caughlin & Malis, 2004). Drawing from Leary's (1999) theorizing, Caughlin and Malis (2004) assert that adolescent feelings of rejection serve as both the impetus for adolescent withdrawal *and* the consequence of parent withdrawal. This reasoning resonates with Curran and Allen's (2017) recent findings that adult children's direct personalization of conflict – their tendencies to feel personally affronted by conflict and inclinations to avoid and be anxious about future conflicts – is a mediator of family conflict and self-esteem.

Given self-esteem's demonstrated role in problematic and indirect conflict strategies, as well as tolerance for disagreement's links with more effective conflict strategies, we assert their associations with admitting and keeping silent about displeasure:

H₁ : Tolerance for disagreement and self-esteem positively predict admitting displeasure and negatively predict silent-treatment use.

Receiving the silent treatment

While using the silent treatment may stem from poor esteem, lessened commitment, or lack of sender's confidence, recipients report their own batch of negative characteristics. Frustrations leave silent-treatment targets desiring more direct, explicit methods of conflict management from their romantic partners (Zadro et al., 2005). We presume that these consequences will persist within parent/child dynamics.

Among what is known about romantic partner's grievance expression, much can be applied to the family context. Conflict often continues as it began, with a romantic partner responding with the same tone and tenor with which they were approached (Sillars & Canary, 2013). However, there are infamous patterns in which one partner's style is complemented or combatted by the other's very different style. Gottman's "demand-withdraw" pattern illuminates how a direct approach is often met with avoidance (See Caughlin & Scott, 2010 for overview, distinct types, and outcomes). In this common destructive cycle, the "demander" tends to be the less satisfied (hence the need to seek change), yet the other partner also finds themselves dissatisfied (Schrodt et al., 2014). Such cycles of contentious confrontation with/from the partner can lead to relationship dissolution and the enactment of "stonewalling" – an intense version of the silent treatment which often results from the stonewaller feeling so inundated with negative emotions that they withdraw altogether (Driver et al., 2012).

The dissatisfaction of couples in demand-withdraw dynamics is somewhat mirrored when parents and children cycle between information seeking and avoidance. As noted above in regard to children's feelings of rejection, Caughlin and Malis (2004) reveal that both family members experience lessened relational and physical health (manifested as high risk-taking behaviors) as a result of not meeting each other's needs to talk about difficult topics. As early parental criticism sends children into self-criticism patterns that can plague them into adulthood (Harris & Howard, 1984), it is unsurprising that Miller-Day and Lee (2001) found parents' indirect displays of displeasure coincided with adult children's lessened feelings of control. As such, we hypothesize this trend in regard to parents' silent-treatment use.

Because the silent treatment "clues in" the recipient to the strong possibility of the sender's displeasure, the target must heighten his/her awareness, look for clues, and decide how to behave in response. As they tend to have more power, parents' enactment of the silent treatment may be even more hazardous than that which is endured within interpersonal relationships. Conversely, directly addressing a child's undesirable behavior in a way that is clear and "contained" (not brought up intermittently as a means of reintroducing guilt or embarrassment) is deemed effective by socialization scholars (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). We assert these principles will prevail here:

H₂: Adult children's feelings of control over their own lives are negatively predicted by their perceptions of parents' use of the silent treatment and are positively predicted by parents' admitting their displeasure.

H₃: Adult children's relational satisfaction with their parent is negatively predicted by the adult children's perceptions of that parent's use of the silent treatment and positively predicted by that parent's admitting displeasure.

Men's and women's communicated displeasure

Adult child report differences between mothers' and fathers' strategies for communicating disappointment (Miller-Day & Lee, 2001). Wood notes that gender differences are often inflated in our everyday thinking (2002), as men and women are truly more similar than different (Dindia & Canary, 2006), but the scientific exploration of gender differences is still necessary. As they represent

traditionally masculine and feminine behaviors, we seek to illuminate perceptions of directness and indirectness in communicating displeasure.

Previous literature suggests that men and women often follow gendered expectations of direct versus indirect conflict communication, particularly within their parental roles. Heterosexual men use more direct and bilateral means of power assertion, heterosexual women use more indirect and unilateral means (Falbo & Peplau, 1980). The indirect communication of disappointment in Miller-Day and Lee's (2001) study was perceived to come from mothers more than from fathers. Stonewalling among married couples paints a similar picture. Though negative patterns of marital communication often involve the husband stonewalling his wife's demands to address the conflict directly (Christensen & Heavey, 1990), wives also avoid/stonewall, which is a strong predictor of relationship dissolution (Driver et al., 2012).

Several scholars note that the gendered trends are actually a proxy for power (Caughlin & Scott, 2010; Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Schrodtt et al., 2014). With women desiring change from their lower power position, and men wanting to keep their satisfying and powerful position, the woman-as-asserter and man-as-avoider dynamic was maintained. That recent studies show both genders in both positions (Schrodtt et al., 2014), is perhaps a reflection of shifts in gendered power in romantic relationships. However, we reiterate our assertion that the silent treatment is a type of avoidance that *does* manipulate, giving its inflictor a powerful position through the strategic ambiguity of inaction.

These studies not only suggest that children will rate their parents differently regarding indirect versus direct strategies of communicating disappointment, but also that they may self-report in ways consistent with previous literature.

H_{4a}: Compared to male adult children, female adult children will report greater silent-treatment use.

H_{4b}: Compared to fathers, mothers will be perceived, by their adult children, as greater enactors of the silent treatment.

Teaching the silent treatment

When parents engage in the silent treatment, they may ultimately impact their child's interpersonal interactions outside of the family. Parents model various communication behaviors to their children, both directly and through their marital/co-parenting communication. Often couched within studies of divorce's impact on children (e.g. Cui & Fincham, 2010), problematic parenting communication behaviors can resurface in the next generation's romantic relationships (Simon & Furman, 2010). Aggressive communication of displeasure resurfaces with aggressive tendencies toward romantic partners (Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004), and both sons and daughters tend to experience low quality, high conflict romantic relationships when they have seen much aggressive and hostile conflict by and between their parents (Cui, Fincham, & Pasley, 2008). But these relationship-distressing behaviors need not be recycled from one generation to the next.

There is evidence that people who observe negative parenting practices can break the pattern in their own adult relationships. As proposed in their hypothesis of the same name, an adult child's path of "modeling" or "compensation" is determined by the child's identification with that parent (Floyd & Morman, 2000). For those who model, more positive parenting behaviors create stronger child identification with the parent, and this strong identification then increases the child's likelihood of engaging in parenting practices similar to those of their parent. Conversely, negative parenting behaviors create a lower level of identification – so potentially distancing that we reason to consider it "de-identification" – that causes the child to dramatically diverge from their parent's practices. Thus, poor parenting practices are mimicked, and positive parenting practices are met with adjustment in future relationships, through (de)identification.

Less studied than modeling, compensation reveals itself in several studies. As documented as part of communication trainings, many abused adult children have established healthy, non-abusive romantic relationships (Wolfe et al., 1997). Desiring better communication than what they were shown, sons of uninvolved and/or deficient fathers are often vigilant in their preparedness and involvement (Pruett, 1987). Studied previously with the intergenerational transmission of affection, sons have been shown to resist their fathers' lack of affectionate father/son exchanges with highly affectionate communication exchanges with their own children (Floyd & Morman, 2000).

Because adult children are negatively impacted by their parents' heavy silent-treatment use (H_2 and H_3), they may de-identify with that parent, thus avoiding this strategy in their romantic and friendly relationships. Floyd and Morman (2000) and Wood and Brownhill (2018) argue that a low-identifying child may turn to alternative role models. This might explain why many children turn to friendships or romantic relationships – rather than (just) their parents – to refine their ideas about romantic relationships (e.g. Furman & Collibee, 2018).

Combined, previous research suggests that silent-treatment use – such as a negative behavior – will lead to de-identification that results in compensation shown through adult children's lower silent-treatment scores. Conversely, low parent silent-treatment use will lend itself to stronger identification and the modeling of this lessened behavior. These notions are subsumed within our hypothesis:

H_5 : As perceived by adult children, identification with the parent will mediate the relationship between parent's use of the silent treatment and the adult child's own use of the silent treatment.

Unlike admitting, dismissive means of communicating displeasure are linked to negative psychological and relational outcomes. Sender's self-esteem and tolerance for disagreement, as well as receiver's control and satisfaction, are all anticipated to function differently for overt “versus” covert strategies of communicating displeasure. We also anticipate that, in this study, responses will align with gendered expectations for communicating displeasure (Palomares, 2008), and these behaviors may be linked between the generations.

Method

Participants

We collected responses from 182 adult children whom we recruited through posts on social media websites and through email. The recruitment messages included a study description, a request for snowball sampling, and the online survey link. The only requirement was that participants be over the age of 18. The mean participant age was 29.65 years old ($SD = 12.09$; $Range = 18–68$). There were 116 females (63.7%) and 33 males (18.1%), the remaining non-reports ($n = 33$, 18.1%). The majority were white ($n = 131$, 72.0%), and the remaining self-identified as follows: 4 Black/African American (2.20%), 10 Asian/Asian Americans (5.50%), 2 Middle Eastern (1.10%), 1 Latino (.5%), 1 Hispanic, with 33 non-reports (18.10%). The majority were raised in the United States ($n = 140$, 76.92%). Six adult children self-identified as being raised in China (3.30%), and each of the following was selected by one participant each: Greece, Saudi Arabia, and Singapore, the remaining were non-reports (17.6%).

Participants answered a series of questions, approved by the institutional review board, which revolved around themselves and their parent(s). As will be discussed later, we employed data from one of their parents, identified by their adult children as follows: 145 biological mothers (79.7%), 27 biological fathers (14.84%), 2 adoptive mothers (1.10%), 1 adoptive father (.01%), 1 stepfather, 1 grandmother, 1 unspecified “other,” and 4 non-reports (2.20%). Due to no meaningful differences between the specific types of parents within the two “male” and “female” categories, and that the

greatest frequencies were of mothers and fathers, the “parent figure” data are collapsed and will be referred to as “mothers” and “fathers” from this point forward. There were no exclusion criteria based on family type or structure. Still, perusal of first-reported *and* second-reported parents yielded no same-sex co-parents, though some may have existed.

Procedures

First, participating adult children agreed to the terms of the online consent form. Instructions for selecting targeted parents were as follows: “We want to learn about the ‘parent(s) you spent most time with while growing up,’” (as used by Miller-Day & Lee, 2001). After responding about the first parent, adult children were asked if they had a second parent whom they spent a lot of time with growing up. If they selected “yes,” they were directed to mimic the steps from the first parent. With the exception of the Identification measure, all measures were based on a 7-point Likert scale, with higher values indicating greater presence of the construct.

Measures

Communicated displeasure: silent treatment, admission of disappointment, and stonewalling

Adult children completed this measure twice: once about themselves and once about a parent. For self-report, participants selected a romantic partner if they had one ($n = 124$). Others considered a “close friend” ($n = 58$). As there were no significant differences between these two groups, we combined them in our analyses. We employed Wright and Roloff’s (2009) modified version of Buss’s (1992) grievance expression scale of three constructs: silent treatment, admitting, and stonewalling. As they had, we randomized whether adult children reported on an incident in which they felt angry, depressed, or disappointed, but we exchanged “depressed” for “sad” so that all three were state emotions. Assessments of adult children’s own silent-treatment behaviors were led by the instruction: “When angry/sad/disappointed with something this person did, how frequently do you do each of the following?”

For parent-targeted reports, participants received the following prompt: “All parents have been displeased, dissatisfied, and/or disappointed with their children at one time or another. We want you to reflect on your parent (that we just asked you to think about) and answer the next set of questions about how she or he communicated that displeasure. As you grew up, this parent may not have always responded in the same ways, but we want you to think of their general tendencies or patterns of behavior that conveyed to you that they were upset with you. There are no right answers, also no wrong answers.” The parent-targeted scale was not randomized for emotion; the stem included all emotions and “upset” replaced mentions of specific emotions in each item. All items were rephrased for the target/child relationship and written in past tense.

Due to conceptual similarity between the silent-treatment and stonewalling subscales of the Communicated Displeasure measure (Wright & Roloff, 2009), we conducted exploratory factor analyses (EFAs) on all 15 items for self-report and parent-targeted data. We used maximum likelihood and an oblimin rotation, and we retained factors based on the scree plots (following recommendations addressed by Costello & Osborne, 2005). See Table 1 for these EFA results. We removed three items from the stonewall subscale for cross-loading issues. The remaining stonewalling items conceptually extend the silent treatment construct by addressing participants’ *continued* silence, perhaps after being confronted or after (in)directly being asked if they are upset. While Costello and Osborne (2005) suggest removing items with loadings below .32 or with cross-loadings, we retained four such items because they *only* met these exclusionary criteria when referencing “anger.”

Table 1. Factor loadings of the grievance expression measure.

Factors and Items	Adult Child (angry)			Adult Child (sad)			Adult Child (disappointed)			Parent		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
1. Silent Treatment												
Don't respond to him/her when s/he talks to me.	.53	.05	.30	.40	.10	-.13	.89	.16	.05	.97	.03	-.14
Ignore him/her.	.80	-.13	.21	.86	.00	.01	.87	.07	.02	.99	.06	-.09
Am silent.	.20	-.11	.49	.65	.02	-.04	.54	.08	.06	.74	-.06	.06
Refuse to do something.	.61	-.02	.06	.53	-.06	.07	.61	-.24	-.13	.65	.05	.00
Give him/her less affection.	.59	-.01	-.28	.68	-.07	.18	.67	-.12	-.22	.60	-.05	.19
Avoid him/her.	.64	.09	.08	.53	.14	.16	.85	.18	.13	.79	.14	.27
2. Admit												
Admit that I am angry/sad/disappointed.	-.04	-.73	-.19	.01	-.87	-.21	.10	.89	.03	-.03	.88	.02
Tell him/her how I am feeling.	-.44	-.59	-.08	-.13	-.82	.10	-.12	.70	-.14	-.05	.90	-.01
Confirm that I am angry/sad/disappointed.	-.01	-.99	.14	.03	-.91	-.04	.08	.78	-.20	.08	.81	-.23
3. Stonewall												
I deny that I am angry/sad/disappointed.	-.16	.33	.59	-.03	.21	.64	.04	-.09	.73	.01	-.14	.69
Tell him/her that I am not angry/sad/disappointed.	.07	.42	.60	.22	.04	.80	-.08	-.01	.87	-.02	.02	.83
Refuse to admit I am angry/sad/disappointed.	.18	.36	.64	-.21	.21	.63	.19	-.15	.67	.23	-.16	.59
Eigenvalue	7.12	1.89	1.21	6.29	2.21	1.12	5.78	2.71	1.46	7.68	2.46	.99
Variance Explained after rotation	47.38	12.53	8.06	41.94	14.72	7.50	38.52	18.07	9.73	51.20	16.40	6.54
Reliability estimate	.78	.86	.80	.84	.94	.89	.86	.87	.86	.92	.93	.85
M (1–7 Range)	2.64	5.02	2.29	2.64	4.91	2.63	2.72	4.88	2.07	2.48	4.76	2.36
SD	.92	1.42	1.14	1.04	1.44	1.22	1.03	1.25	.91	2.98	1.63	1.26

Tolerance for disagreement

The 15-item tolerance for disagreement scale (revised by Teven et al., 1998; Cronbach's alpha .86), was used to measure each participant's level of tolerance ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .90$, $\alpha = .87$). An example item is "It is more fun to be involved in a discussion where there is a lot of disagreement."

Self-esteem

The Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale was implemented for this self-perception ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.10$, $\alpha = .88$). The 10-item scale included items such as "I feel that I have a number of good qualities." Recently, the scale's reliability was recorded at a Cronbach's alpha of .88 (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004).

Control of one's life

To measure one's belief of having personal control of his/her life, we used a perceived control measure with each parent targeted separately (Miller-Day & Lee, 2001, cronbach's alpha = .72). Items to this stem "When my parent would respond to me in these ways, I felt: ..." are as follows: "I was in control of my life," "emotionally in control," and "in control of the direction of my life." We added the reverse-coded item "that my parent was in control of my life" (4-item $\alpha = .86$ to .87; female parent: $M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.44$; male parent: $M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.34$).

Relationship satisfaction

Our analyses utilized Huston, McHale and Crouter's (1986) measure of overall feelings toward the target parent over the last month. It is a 10-item semantic differential scale that includes 8 items and 2 "filler" items (free-tied down and hard-easy), in this format: "Our relationship has been..." with dichotomous adjectives (miserable-enjoyable, lonely-friendly, etc.). These 8-items were reliable

Table 2. Correlations among variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1.Adult Child Silent	-										
2.Adult Child Treatment	.452**	.431**	.152								
3.Adult Child Stonewalling	-.515**	-.303**	-.167								
4.Adult Child Admitting	-.106	-.155	-.173								
5.Adult Child Self-Tolerance for Disagreement	-.551**	-.049	-.155								
6.Parent Silent	-.041	.380**	.423**								
7.Parent Treatment	.346*	.291*	.396**								
8.Parent Stonewalling	-.220	-.192	-.429**								
9.Relational Satisfaction	-.475**	-.072	-.183								
10.Control	-.175	-.031	-.208								
11.Identification with Parent	-.279	.006	-.216								

Note. Adult Child Silent Treatment illustrates *Angry*, *Sad*, and *Disappointed* Correlations, Respectively. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 3. Results of regression analyses testing hypotheses 1.

Dependent Variable	Independent Variables						Model Fit			
	Self-esteem			Tolerance for Disagreement			<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>R</i> ²	Adjusted <i>R</i> ²
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Standardized <i>Beta</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Standardized <i>Beta</i>				
1. Adult Child Admitting Displeasure when Angry	.57**	.14	.48	.14	.20	.08	8.91	2, 54	.25	.22
2. Adult Child Admitting Displeasure when Sad	.38*	.16	.28	.33	.18	.21	5.80	2, 64	.15	1.27
4. Adult Child Silent Treatment when Angry	-.42**	.09	-.54	-.06	.12	-.05	11.90	2, 54	.31	.28
7. Adult Child Stonewalling when Angry	-.25*	.13	-.26	-.16	.17	-.12	2.75	2, 54	.09	.06

Note. **p* < .05, ***p* < .01.

(8-item $\alpha = .96 - .98$; female parent: $M = 5.77$, $SD = 1.42$; male parent: $M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.79$; previous studies yield coefficient alphas as high as .98). A final global satisfaction item was significantly correlated with the 8-item composite ($r = .83$ to .89) to ensure reliability of the instrument.

Identification

Identification was assessed for each parent using the inclusion of other in the self 1-item scale (IOS; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). For this measure, participants chose a pair of circles that go from not touching to mostly overlapping one another; signifying de-identification to strong identification with the parent(s): (female parent: $M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.76$; male parent: $M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.89$).

Table 2 displays correlations among the variables.

Results

Addressing silent treatment and admission's links to psychological factors, H_1 predicted that tolerance for disagreement and self-esteem would lead to adult children's greater admission of displeasure and lessened silent-treatment use. To determine if targeted emotions functioned differently, we independently analyzed anger, sadness, and disappointment prompts as separate outcome variables in our multiple regression analyses. See Table 3 for results of significant models. All nonsignificant models, for all hypothesis tests, are available upon request from the first author.

The outcome of admitting negative feelings yielded mixed findings based on the emotional prompt. For anger and sadness, self-esteem was a significant positive predictor ($B = .57$, $p = < .01$; $B = .38$, $p = .02$, respectively), but tolerance for disagreement was a nonsignificant predictor ($B = .14$, $p = .49$; $B = .33$, $p = .08$). The model for disappointment was not significant.

Silent treatment was analyzed next. For anger, self-esteem was a significant negative predictor ($B = -.42$, $p = < .01$), but tolerance for disagreement was a nonsignificant predictor ($B = -.06$, $p = .64$). For sadness and disappointment, the models were nonsignificant.

Stonewalling yielded similar results. For anger, self-esteem was a significant negative predictor ($B = -.25$, $p = .05$), but tolerance for disagreement was a nonsignificant predictor ($B = -.16$, $p = .36$), of silent-treatment use. Models for sadness and disappointment were nonsignificant. H_1 , receives only minimal support, with this significance specific to self-esteem's positive links to admitting anger and sadness (but not disappointment), and self-esteem's negative link to silent-treatment and stonewalling use when angry.

For hypotheses addressing parent/child dynamics, we incorporated data about only one parent per participant, specifically the first parent report. Nonindependence of the first- and second-parent data (ICC's ranging from .19 to .362, $p \leq .05$ (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006)), and many having only one parent about whom they reported, led to this decision.

Table 4. Results of regression analyses testing hypotheses 2 and 3.

Dependent Variable	Independent Variables									Model Fit			
	Parent Silent Treatment			Parent Stonewalling			Parent Admitting Displeasure			F	df	R ²	Adjusted R ²
	β	SE	b	β	SE	b	β	SE	b				
1. Adult Child's Feelings of Control	-.03	.04	-.07	-.15	.12	-.14	.17*	.08	.20	6.02	3, 150	.12	.09
2. Adult Child's Relational Satisfaction with Parent	-.08*	.04	-.17	-.05	.12	-.04	.20*	.08	.23	6.00	3, 150	.11	.09

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

To address H_2 , we regressed the first parent's communication variables onto the adult child's feelings of control. This parent's silent-treatment use was nonsignificant ($B = -.03$, $p = .39$), as was stonewalling ($B = -.15$, $p = .20$), yet admitting emerged as a positive predictor ($B = .17$, $p = .04$). See Table 4 for H_2 and H_3 results.

H_3 predicted that the parent communication of displeasure would coincide with the child's relational satisfaction with that parent. The parent's silent-treatment use was negatively linked to satisfaction ($B = -.08$, $p = .05$), admitting displeasure was positively linked to satisfaction ($B = .20$, $p = .02$), and stonewalling was nonsignificant ($B = -.05$, $p = .69$).

In our fourth hypothesis, we predicted that, compared to males, female adult children (H_{4a}) and mothers (H_{4b}) would be greater enactors of the silent treatment. For H_{4a} , regarding adult children's self-reports, the only significant difference was admitting disappointment (but not admitting anger or sadness), $t(18.28) = -2.88$, $p = .01$, *Cohen's d* = .96, with males less likely ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.10$) than females ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.24$) to admit. Regarding H_{4b} , according to adult children's perceptions, maternal figures were shown as the more likely admitters of displeasure, $t(18.28) = -2.88$, $p = .01$, *Cohen's d* = .52; maternal scored higher ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.58$) than paternal ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.79$) figures. A post-hoc sex difference emerged for adult children's tolerance for disagreement $t(53.67) = 3.58$, $p < .01$, *Cohen's d* = .70, with male adult children reporting high scores ($M = 4.37$, $SD = .83$) than females ($M = 3.78$, $SD = .87$). Combined, H_{4a} and H_{4b} are unsupported.

H_5 , as directed by the modeling/compensation hypothesis, proposed that perceived parent and adult child silent-treatment use was mediated by degree of identification with the parent. Using PROCESS macro, model 4 (Hayes, 2013), we conducted several mediation analyses using each of the self-report silent-treatment variables as the outcome (Y), identification with parent as the mediator (M), and parent silent treatment as the predictor (X). While this program is designed to assess causal relationships, we employed it because of the theorized time order of our variables. Across all mediations, there were no significant indirect effects through identification (M), yet – for the sad and disappointed prompts (but not the angry) – there were direct effects of parent silent treatment (X) on the adult child's silent-treatment use (Y).

Tables 5 and 6 detail mediation models for targeted emotions that yielded significance. For sadness and disappointment, there was no indirect effect, $ab = -.001$, 95% CI $[-.05, .05]$ and $ab = -.002$, 95% CI $[-.03, .11]$, respectively, but there was a direct effect. H_5 was not supported.

Discussion

This investigation focused on the individual and relational correlates of grievance expressions within the family, and the transmission of the silent treatment to adult children's use with nonfamily members. We found that, for parents and adult children, the silent treatment corresponds with negative trends of sender's lessened self-esteem (when angry and sad) and receiver's lessened relational satisfaction. Parents' admitting displeasure was associated with two promising outcome

Table 5. Mediation model for adult child silent treatment when sad.

Antecedent		Consequent					
		<i>M</i> (Identification with Parent)			<i>Y</i> (Child Silent Treatment)		
		Coefficient	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	Coefficient	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>X</i> (Parent ST)	<i>a</i>	.04	.05	.45	<i>c'</i>	.09	.03
<i>M</i> (Identify)		—	—	—	<i>b</i>	-.02	.07
Constant	<i>iM</i>	4.76	.28	<.001	<i>i_Y</i>	2.53	.37
$R^2 = .01$					$R^2 = .15$		
$F(1, 58) = .59, p = .45$					$F(2, 57) = 4.87, p = .01$		

Table 6. Mediation model for adult child silent treatment when disappointed.

Antecedent		Consequent					
		<i>M</i> (Identification with Parent)			<i>Y</i> (Child Silent Treatment)		
		Coefficient	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	Coefficient	<i>SE</i>	<i>P</i>
<i>X</i> (Parent ST)	<i>a</i>	.02	.05	.77	<i>c'</i>	.09*	.03
<i>M</i> (Identify)		—	—	—	<i>b</i>	-.13	.07
Constant	<i>iM</i>	4.71	.32	<.01	<i>i_Y</i>	3.00	.36
$R^2 = .002$					$R^2 = .23$		
$F(1, 48) = .09, p = .77$					$F(2, 47) = 7.87, p = .002$		

variables: adult child's greater satisfaction and adult child's heightened sense of control. To a small degree, admitting was higher among mothers than among fathers, and higher among adult daughters than sons. While these findings clearly direct parents toward more open than closed means of communicating their displeasure, the findings are less confirmatory in regard to the transmission of overt and covert displays of displeasure from one family member to another. We begin our discussion around this very issue, address study implications, and conclude with our limitations in relation to future directions.

Given the lack of evidence in support of compensation's utility in this context, we return to previous findings that directly assess or are in accordance with compensating (adult) child behaviors. This process of adult children "flipping" their parent's inadequate behavior was shown by Wolfe and colleagues (1997); but it was in regard to intense, frequent aggressive behaviors. Compensation is also enacted by adult children responding to their parents' dismal amounts of positive parenting behaviors (e.g. Floyd & Morman, 2000). Both of these studies represent extreme circumstances that lead to hurt and relationship dissolution. It stands to reason that a child would feel distanced by these parents, leading to their de-identification and search for subsequent communication mentors. Those in our study may be in relationships far less problematic. The silent treatment – in and of itself – is not *as* negative a behavior as those employed in previous compensation studies. Our study's adult children reported that parent silent-treatment use coincided with relationship dissatisfaction (H3), but that it did not lessen children's feelings of control (H2), or predict identification (within the mediation model). Our trends somewhat corroborate this idea of the silent treatment being a less offensive family communication behavior than those behaviors previously shown to ignite compensation.

Identification's lack of significance within our results should not signify its unimportance. It is possible that identification buffers or enhances some parenting behaviors' impacts on child behaviors. This was shown in Brook, Whiteman, Gordon, and Brook's (1986) study of adolescent daughters of drug-using fathers. More highly identifying daughters were shown to model their fathers' behaviors, those low in identification showed no such trend. A focused exploration of those in highly avoidant and/or passive aggressive family environments (i.e. silent treatment and stonewalling), might show a similar trend of identification serving to mitigate or exacerbate modeling processes.

Without identification's mediation, parents' silent treatment with their adult child had a small, positive direct effect on the adult child's enactment toward their friend or romantic partner. This corresponds with aforementioned trends for relationship management and grievance expression. By observing their parent's practices, the child might mirror these without giving them any thought. While we researchers reveal the silent treatment and stonewalling to be relationship-distancing and manipulative (Buss, 1992), many adult children may not. This might be particularly true if this parent behavior is couched within many other positive parenting practices, and if it makes the adult child feel powerful when they use it themselves. Still, given that couples and friendships are harmed by silent displeasure, those helping families to better communicate may be wise to address attitudes toward the silent treatment, and to further squelch its use.

Sillars and Canary (2013) caution that we already know more about *negative* conflict-related behaviors than positive mechanisms. We are encouraged by the role of "admitting disappointment" alongside the more covert displays of grievance expression. Our regression analysis showed that parent's admitted disappointment, but neither silent treatment nor stonewalling, significantly predicted child's control. This parenting behavior also led to greater relationship satisfaction, which brings hope to the parent that is worried that honesty about disappointment/displeasure could harm their relationship with their child. As children's appraisals of interparental conflict can influence the adult child's romantic conflict resolution (Simon & Furman, 2010), researchers and families alike might directly address sense-making processes and meta-communication about conflict behaviors and their impacts.

When parents are open and honest with their children about their negative feelings,

this works positively for the relationship and for the child. In learning to regulate their own emotions, children are best suited when their parents communicate their own emotions openly (Dunsmore, Her, Halberstadt, & Perez-Rivera, 2009). Parents who admit disappointment may also help their child to solidify the norms, rules, and expectations of the household. This admittance may be uncomfortable, but casting parent comforts aside can enhance family dynamics. We agree with Caughlin and Malis (2004) who encourage parents to engage with their children, even about things that make them uncomfortable.

The benefits of admittance and the consequences of silence are wrapped up in certainty. In relationships, certainty coincides with trust and stability, both of which are staples of successful parent/child bonds (Amato, 1994). While some might keep grievances quiet out of insecurity (this aligns with the finding that admitting and staying silent have positive and negative associations with self-esteem, respectively), we caution that their induction of uncertainty can be even more damaging than a direct, face-threatening grievance (Williams, 2001). Feeling control over one's life is so important to how we enact our family roles, adult children's perceptions of theirs *and* their parental figures' abilities to engage in competent interpersonal communication are linked to their mental health (e.g. Schrodtt, 2006). From this we defer that an adult child with direct, open parents is more likely to be competent and confident in performing their own adult relationship roles.

Limitations and future directions

Future studies of transmitted communicated displeasure might address the following limitations of an adult child population that lacks great diversity in its parent/child dynamics, failure to employ measures of conflict frequency or affectionate communication, and little information regarding the type or nature of the referenced romantic/friend relationship. These, as well as accompanying future directions, are discussed herein.

Our first limitation is our sample of adult children and reliance on their retrospective accounts. People tend to show stability in their communication and conflict patterns over the course of their lives (Atchley, 1989). Curran, Ogolsky, Haen, and Bosch (2011) reveal that parent behaviors are more influential on (adult) child behavior than is true of actual parenting behavior patterns. In these ways, retrospection can enhance rather than detract from clarity. Still, adult children's perceptions

may be faulty. A younger sample, as well as one more diverse in its range of identification and relational quality, might be more advantageous, despite an obvious concern (raised by a wise reviewer) about avoidance being almost impossible in very early parent/child interactions in which attentiveness is crucial.

Next, we address several limitations of failing to include pertinent variables surrounding communicated grievances. As it was not our focus, we did not assess the frequency of conflict in the relationship. It was not the focus of Caughlin and Malis's (2004) study either, but their participating parents *and* children's reports of frequency of parent/child conflict were both negatively correlated with the child's self-esteem. While frequent conflict is harmful, its negative effects are lessened when the adolescent doesn't think of their family as a very central part of their life (Yuen, Fuligni, Gonzales, & Telzer, 2018), which reminds us that identification with parents is still important for future study.

Affection also warrants inclusion in future research of grievance expressions. A myriad of research employing affection exchange theory (Floyd, Hesse, & Generous, 2018 for a review) suggests the power of affection to unite and buffer relationships. The romantic couple literature talks about the withholding of sex as commonplace to induce jealousy or punish (e.g. Yoshimura & Boon, 2018). Parents who give the silent treatment are enacting nonverbal behaviors that might also communicate a lack of warmth, even a lack of love. For those who admit displeasure, this is best communicated lovingly. Similar to Gottman's (1994) five-to-one ratio of positive to negative messages, communicating love as well as hugs and "I love you's" serve to remind the target of the disappointment that they are still valued and appreciated, even when being critiqued. Given the power of affection to support, especially in times of negativity and conflict (Driver et al., 2012), we suggest further exploration of admitting disappointment with specific assessment of communicated affection and affirmation (note that some of the employed items address the role of affection in grievance expression).

In addition to revealing what needs to be introduced in future research, our findings suggest something that need not be emphasized: gender. Consistent with the broader scholarship on gender differences, there were only minimal differences between male and female communication (Dindia & Canary, 2006). Mothers were perceived as more likely to admit their displeasure, which suggests they may be slightly more forward when it comes to family conflict. Parallel to what was found in Schrodtt et al.'s (2014) meta-analysis of demand-withdraw patterns, men's *and* women's behaviors both lead to the same negative outcomes. So, we suggest that future studies only employ gender when examining how our *communication about* gender might influence relationships and subsequent communication.

Future research might focus more on the sex and gender dynamics of the *romantic relationships* referenced by grievance expressers. We neither asked about gender identity, nor if they were referencing same-sex or opposite-sex romantic partners. Both of these are limitations. Gendered differences tend to be smaller when assessed within same-sex dyads (Falbo & Peplau, 1980). Though same-sex couples are largely similar to male/female partnerships in regard to their degree and topics of conflict, committed lesbian couples are less likely than heterosexual married women to report that they keep their feelings to themselves (Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2005). Information about, and inclusion of more diverse romantic relationships is advantageous.

Finally, that the assessed emotions functioned differently in our study was an obvious limitation in the power of our analyses, but this also raises interesting questions about the nature of our sample and the roles/relationships we are assessing. Our findings point toward a heightened emphasis on anger, despite performing similarly to sadness and disappointment in Wright and Roloff's (2009) study. We suggest asking multiple family members, employing dyadic or triadic within-family samples so as to bypass our study's limitation of only including the primary parent's role *from* the adult child's perspective (See Schrodtt, 2015).

Conclusion

The current study identified how the silent treatment coincides with negative personal and relational troubles. That the modeling/compensation hypothesis's focus on identification did not manifest here suggests that adult children may go on "autopilot," as is common with conflict (Sillars & Canary, 2013). Because habits form early, future scholarship should address the transmission of the silent treatment, and we suggest families, practitioners, and relational partners discourage it from family, friendship, and romantic relationship schemas. By replacing aloof and distancing communication with affection and hope, as is recently shown to aid in constructive conflict socialization from parents to children (Merolla & Kam, 2018), parents might better assist their children in properly showing their own emotions within the family and in their later life relationships.

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