

**UNDERSTANDING MOTHER-ADOLESCENT  
CONFLICT DISCUSSIONS: CONCURRENT AND  
ACROSS-TIME PREDICTION FROM YOUTHS'  
DISPOSITIONS AND PARENTING**

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**WITH COMMENTARY BY**

*Judith G. Smetana  
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## ABSTRACT

Adolescence is often thought of as a period during which the quality of parent-child interactions can be relatively stressed and conflictual. There are individual differences in this regard, however, with only a modest percent of youths experiencing extremely conflictual relationships with their parents. Nonetheless, there is relatively little empirical research on factors in childhood or adolescence that predict individual differences in the quality of parent-adolescent interactions when dealing with potentially conflictual issues. Understanding such individual differences is critical because the quality of both parenting and the parent-adolescent relationship is predictive of a range of developmental outcomes for adolescents.

The goals of the research were to examine dispositional and parenting predictors of the quality of parents' and their adolescent children's emotional displays (anger, positive emotion) and verbalizations (negative or positive) when dealing with conflictual issues, and if prediction over time supported continuity versus discontinuity in the factors related to such conflict. We hypothesized that adolescents' and parents' conflict behaviors would be predicted by both childhood and concurrent parenting and child dispositions (and related problem behaviors) and that we would find evidence of both parent- and child-driven pathways.

Mothers and adolescents ( $N = 126$ ,  $M$  age = 13 years) participated in a discussion of conflictual issues. A multimethod, multireporter (mother, teacher, and sometimes adolescent reports) longitudinal approach (over 4 years) was used to assess adolescents' dispositional characteristics (control/regulation, resiliency, and negative emotionality), youths' externalizing problems, and parenting variables (warmth, positive expressivity, discussion of emotion, positive and negative family expressivity). Higher quality conflict reactions (i.e., less negative and/or more positive) were related to both concurrent and antecedent measures of children's dispositional characteristics and externalizing problems, with findings for control/regulation and negative emotionality being much more consistent for daughters than sons. Higher quality conflict reactions were also related to higher quality

parenting in the past, positive rather than negative parent-child interactions during a contemporaneous nonconflictual task, and reported intensity of conflict in the past month. In growth curves, conflict quality was primarily predicted by the intercept (i.e., initial levels) of dispositional measures and parenting, although maintenance or less decrement in positive parenting, greater decline in child externalizing problems, and a greater increase in control/regulation over time predicted more desirable conflict reactions. In structural equation models in which an aspect of parenting and a child dispositional variable were used to predict conflict reactions, there was continuity of both type of predictors, parenting was a unique predictor of mothers' (but not adolescents') conflict reactions (and sometimes mediated the relations of child dispositions to conflict reactions), and child dispositions uniquely predicted adolescents' reactions and sometimes mothers' conflict reactions. The findings suggest that parent-adolescent conflict may be influenced by both child characteristics and quality of prior and concurrent parenting, and that in this pattern of relations, child effects are more evident than parent effects.

## I. INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Adolescence, although no longer thought of as necessarily a period of “storm and stress” (Arnett, 1999), remains a period of heightened negative emotionality both in terms of individuals’ experience and in interactions with others, particularly with parents (Larson & Lampman-Petratis, 1989). Simultaneous with these increases in negativity are decreases in the closeness felt between parents and youths (Collins & Steinberg, 2006; McGue, Elkins, Walden, & Iacono, 2005; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006). Thus, adolescence continues to be thought of as a period during which the quality of parent–child interactions can be relatively stressed and conflictual. There are individual differences in this regard, however, with only approximately 5–15% of youths experiencing extremely conflictual relationships with their parents (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Smetana et al., 2006). Nonetheless, there is relatively little empirical research on factors in childhood or adolescence that predict individual differences in the quality of parent–adolescent interactions when dealing with potentially conflictual issues. Understanding such individual differences is critical because the quality of both parenting and the parent–adolescent relationship is predictive of a range of developmental outcomes for adolescents (see Collins & Steinberg, 2006).

The purpose of the research in this monograph was to examine child and parenting variables related to individual differences in the verbal and nonverbal emotional reactions of youths and their parents when discussing topics of disagreement. Briefly stated, our general hypothesis in this research was that individual differences in the intensity of mother–child conflict-related interactions in adolescence stem from childhood, as well as concurrent, quality of parenting and child dispositions. Thus, the quality of concurrent and longitudinal relations of emotion-related parenting, concurrent and prior youths’ temperament/personality, and recently occurring conflict were examined as correlates and predictors of parents’ and youths’ conflict reactions. (Note that here and throughout we use the terms “predict” and “predictors” to refer to relations across time, and not to imply

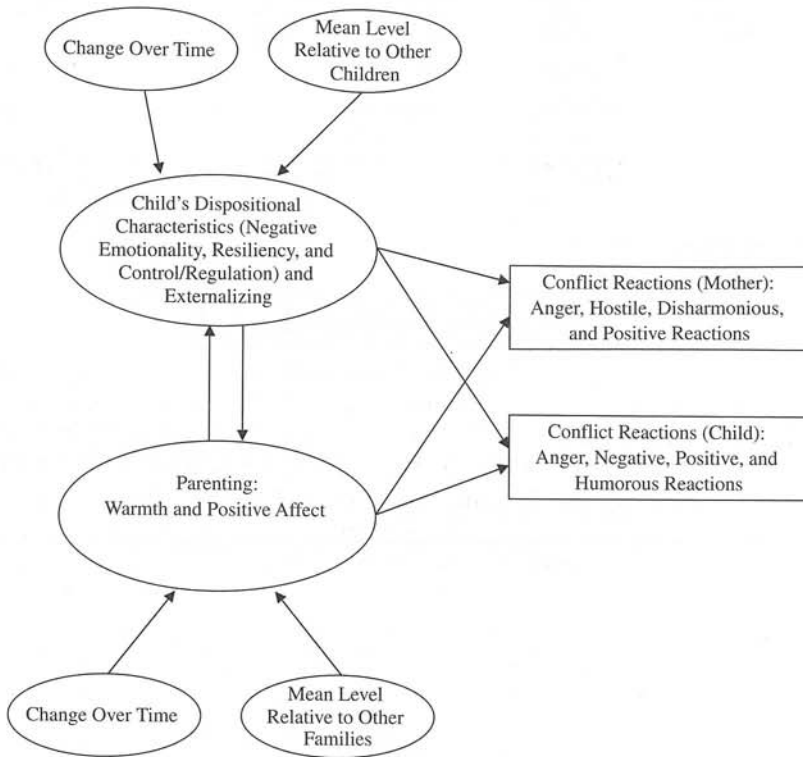


FIGURE 1.—Conceptual model.

causality.) Figure 1 provides a schematic for our conceptual framework in which prior levels of dispositional variables and quality of parenting (which affect one another over time), as well as change in these variables, are expected to predict subsequent parent–adolescent conflict reactions. In particular, we examined several issues: (1) the relation of quality of mothers' and youths' conflict reactions to children's concurrent and previously assessed dispositional characteristics (i.e., regulation/control, negative emotionality, and personality resiliency) and externalizing problems, and whether the quality of conflict reactions was predicted from the initial levels 4 years prior and patterns of change in children's dispositional characteristics; (2) the relation of quality of conflict reactions to quality of concurrent and prior parenting (i.e., parental positive affect and warmth), as well as recent parent–adolescent conflict, and whether the quality of conflict reactions was predicted from the initial levels and patterns of change in parenting; (3) the degree to which quality of both mothers' and youths' conflict reactions were uniquely predicted by child dispositional

variables versus parenting quality; and (4) if parenting mediated the relations of child dispositions to the quality of conflict reactions or vice versa (i.e., if child dispositional variables mediated the relations of parenting to conflict reactions) over time. The latter issue concerns the degree to which the process tends to be child-driven or parent-driven across time, or both. We hypothesized that adolescents' and parents' conflict behaviors would be predicted by both childhood and concurrent parenting and child dispositions (and related problem behaviors) and that we would find evidence of both parent- and child-driven pathways. Longitudinal data from three assessments, each 2 years apart, were the bases of the analyses.

In the introduction of this monograph, we first discuss general findings on parent-adolescent conflict and the relation of individual differences in the quality of such conflict to adolescent outcomes. This review is to establish the importance of the topic and to provide a background for the study. Next we discuss theoretical approaches for conceptualizing patterns of change from childhood to adolescence that affected our conceptual framework and predictions. Then we turn to issues that are more directly related to specific questions in this monograph, including the prediction of the quality of parent-child interactions from both parenting and children's dispositional characteristics. As part of this discussion, the dispositional characteristics of children assessed in this study—control/regulation, personality resiliency, and negative emotionality—are defined and placed in a conceptual context; moreover, data on the continuity of such behavior from childhood into adolescence are briefly reviewed. Next, moderation of parent-adolescent conflict and related constructs by sex of the adolescent is examined. Finally, the present study and our hypotheses are outlined.

#### PARENT-ADOLESCENT CONFLICT: WHAT IS KNOWN AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

As noted by Smetana et al. (2006) and Steinberg and Silk (2002), the nature and quality of adolescents' relationships with their parents—including conflict and harmony—are among the most researched topics in the adolescent literature. Although there are plentiful data indicating that adolescence usually is not nearly as tumultuous as its reputation (Arnett, 1999), adolescence is perceived by parents as a challenging stage of child-rearing. Bickering and squabbling over everyday issues such as chores and responsibilities, household rules, school, autonomy, privileges, and standards of behavior are commonplace for parents and their adolescents, especially during early adolescence (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Laursen, 1995; Smetana, 1996). In contrast, frequent, high-intensity conflict is not normative during adolescence (Arnett, 1999; Steinberg & Silk, 2002).

Nonetheless, although parents and youths tend to view their relationships with one another as supportive (Richardson, Galambos, Schulenberg, & Petersen, 1984), they report less frequent expressions of positive emotion and more frequent negative emotion in early to mid-adolescence than during the preadolescent period (Collins & Steinberg, 2006; Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996).

Using meta-analytic procedures, Laursen, Coy, and Collins (1998) examined changes in frequency and intensity of parent-child conflict as youths move into and through adolescence. They found that although the number of conflicts between parents and youths may actually decline across adolescence, there appears to be a mild increase in the negative-affective intensity of parent-child conflicts from early to mid-adolescence (also see Smetana et al., 2006). Additional analyses indicated that the small increase in conflict-related negative affect between early and mid-adolescence was reliably demonstrated only in the father-son dyad or for youths', rather than parents', reports of affect. Studies since the 1998 meta-analysis suggest that the increase in adolescents' negative affect toward parents from early to mid-adolescence during potentially conflictual discussions can be substantial (Kim, Conger, Lorenz, & Elder, 2001) and that disagreements, anger, and tension with parents increase from age 11 to 14, especially for girls (McGue et al., 2005), whereas positive parental affect declines substantially (Loeber et al., 2000).

Perhaps because adolescents' relationships with their mothers tend to be closer than those with their fathers (Richardson et al., 1984), conflict between mothers and adolescents, especially mother-daughter conflict, tends to be more intense than conflict between fathers and adolescents (Laursen & Collins, 1994; Montemayor, Eberly, & Flannery, 1993; Steinberg & Silk, 2002; compare with Robin, Koepke, & Moye, 1990). McGue et al. (2005) found that girls, in comparison with boys, reported more positive relations (including less hostile, conflictual interactions) with parents at age 11, but that this difference evaporated by age 14; thus, it is possible that reports of greater conflict for parents and daughters are partly due to the more dramatic decline in the quality of their relationship from late childhood into adolescence. However, this pattern of gender differences has not always been found and was not evident in the Laursen et al. (1998) meta-analysis.

#### QUALITY OF THE PARENT-ADOLESCENT CONFLICTS AND ADOLESCENTS' SOCIOEMOTIONAL OUTCOMES

An important question for those wishing to study parent-adolescent conflict reactions is whether the degree of support, derogation, or hostility

in parent–adolescent discussions when problem solving, decision making, or discussing potentially conflictual issues is related to important developmental outcomes for youth. The limited data suggest that the answer is yes, but depending on the intensity of the negativity or the quality of the ongoing relationship. High levels of parent–child conflict and negativity often have been linked to negative outcomes for youths (Forehand, Long, Brody, & Fauber, 1986; Kim et al., 2001; also see Ramos, Guerin, Gottfried, Bathurt, & Oliver, 2005), particularly when they occur within the context of contentious and hostile interchanges (Laursen & Collins, 1994; Kim et al., 2001; Steinberg & Silk, 2002). However, relations of conflict and parental negativity with negative developmental outcomes or behaviors generally are modest or nonsignificant when adolescents perceive their parents as supportive (Barrera & Stice, 1998; Galambos, Sears, Almeida, & Kolaric, 1995). In fact, it has been argued that moderate levels of parent–adolescent conflict that occur within a relationship characterized by harmony and cohesion may be associated with better adjustment than either no conflict or frequent conflict (Adams & Laursen, 2001; Cooper, 1988; Smetana et al., 2006). Moreover, the quality of the interactions during conflict interactions may be critical. As summarized by Steinberg and Silk (2002), “it may be the affective intensity of the conflict, rather than its frequency or content, that distinguishes adaptive from maladaptive parent–adolescent conflict” (p. 123).

For example, parental mutuality and relatedness during discussions that involve decision making and/or potential conflict—including behaviors that indicate support for, involvement with, and respect or validation of the other—have been positively associated with adolescents’ identity exploration, ego development (which reflects adolescents’ characteristic ways of imposing meaning upon their experiences and their relationships; Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O’Connor, 1994), and self-esteem (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O’Connor, 1994; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985), as have adolescents’ autonomy-relatedness communications toward their parents (i.e., behavior that involves negotiating differences in opinion, interest and attention to another’s thoughts and feelings, independence of thought, and interest in, involvement in, and validation of another person’s thoughts and feelings; Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O’Connor, 1994). Supportive rather than hostile parent–adolescent interactions during problem solving or potentially contentious discussions likely foster a sense of connection between adolescents and their parents, and connection with significant adults is believed to promote positive identity development (Grotevant, 1998).

Allen also found that individual differences in autonomy-promoting and relatedness communications were associated with youths’ problem behaviors. Both parents’ and youths’ autonomy-relatedness communications when youths were age 14 (but generally not at age 16)—including expressing

and discussing reasons behind disagreements, confidence in stating one's positions, validation and agreement with another's position, and attending to the other person's statements—were negatively related to youths' depressive mood at age 16 and externalizing symptoms at age 17. Adolescent-to-father and mother-to-adolescent inhibition of relatedness scores were positively related to youths' depressed affect at age 16. In contrast, youths' hostile and cutting off behaviors toward their mothers at age 16 predicted higher levels of externalizing problems at that age (Allen, Hauser, Eickholt, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994). Youths who were hostile toward their parent also tended to be low in autonomous relatedness in parent-adolescent discussions (Allen, Hauser, O'Connor, Bell, & Eickholt, 1996), whereas parental undermining of autonomy was linked to youths' concurrent hostility toward their parents and hostility with peers nearly a decade later (Allen, Hauser, O'Connor, & Bell, 2002).

In brief, Allen found associations of both autonomy-promoting behavior and relatedness or hostility during family discussions with a variety of developmental outcomes. Autonomy-promoting or autonomy-inhibiting verbalizations cannot be considered equivalent to hostile parent-adolescent communications, and in Allen's research the overt expression of hostility has not been as consistently (or uniquely; Allen et al., 1996) related to youths' prosocial behavior or psychosocial development as have autonomy-relatedness communications.

Consistent with the findings of Allen, Hauser, Eickholt et al. (1994), Henggeler, Hanson, Borduin, Watson, and Brunk (1985) found adolescent sons' and mothers' supportive statements during a joint decision-making task were significantly lower for dyads in which the adolescent was a felon. Conversely, observed adolescent aggressive communications, maternal defensive communications, and reports of conflict and observed conflict tended to be higher for nonviolent felons than for control youths, whereas violent felons appeared to have low levels of all types of communication with their mothers. Adolescents' reports of attacking versus compromising during disagreements with parents also have been positively related to concurrent reports of youths' misconduct, depression, and distress, whereas adolescents' reports of avoiding talking during disagreements have been positively related to youths' concurrent depression (youth-reported) and distress (parent- and youth-reported, combined; Rubenstein & Feldman, 1993). Moreover, consistent with other research demonstrating relations between the frequency of adolescent-reported conflict with parents and concurrent externalizing problems (e.g., Barrera, Chassin, & Rogosch, 1993), Burt, McGue, Krueger, and Iacono (2005) found that a composite measure of child-reported parent-child conflict at age 11 (including frequency and intensity of conflict) predicted youths' self-reported externalizing behavior problems 3 years later, and vice versa. In this genetically



informed twin study, reported conflict predicted youths' externalizing problems through genetic, common environmental, and unique environmental factors. Thus, the results suggested that parent-child conflict partially resulted from parents' responses to their child's heritable externalizing problem behavior, while simultaneously contributing to their child's externalizing problem via environmental mechanisms. Once genetic effects were statistically controlled, parenting (as perceived by adolescents) continued to exert an environmentally mediated influence (both family-wide and child-specific) on youths' externalizing behavior.

In summary, initial research suggests that high levels of positive affect and support, and low frequency of intense conflict and/or low levels of hostility in parent-adolescent discussions/conflict are related to higher quality socioemotional functioning in adolescents. Thus, it is important to study factors that predict individual differences in both adolescents' and parents' affect communications when discussing potentially conflictual issues.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

There are several global conceptual models that seem to be particularly relevant to a discussion of normative change in parent-offspring conflict and prediction of individual differences in the quality of parent-adolescent conflict-related reactions from variables in childhood. However, relevant theories tend to differ in their emphasis on mean-level and differential continuity (e.g., De Fruyt et al., 2006). Mean-level continuity or stability refers to the extent to which the mean level of a variable is stable over time. Differential continuity refers to the degree to which relative rank-order differences among people remain invariant over time.

Especially in past decades, a quite common conceptual model has been that many aspects of adolescents' biological and social functioning change fairly abruptly in adolescence. This perspective was partly derived from Hall's (1904) now historic assertion that adolescence is a time of tumultuous change and stress, and partly from psychoanalytic theorists' ideas regarding hormonal changes at puberty, resurrected oedipal feelings and conflicts (Freud, 1921/1955; see Collins & Laursen, 2004), and changes in adolescence due to ego identity development and striving for autonomy (Blos, 1979; Erikson, 1950, 1968). More recently, some researchers have viewed transitions such as adolescence as turning points that provide opportunities for the emergence of new behaviors, the discontinuation of behaviors, the alteration of behaviors, or the re-patterning of behaviors, all in response to the contextual demands brought forth by the transition points (Graber &

Brooks-Gunn, 1996). Alternatively, or in addition, the changes in adolescence may be viewed as due to either relatively abrupt biological changes (e.g., puberty) that affect the social context (see Laursen et al., 1998) or changes in youths' cognitive maturity and in social expectancies (Collins & Laursen, 2004). In addition, some theorists view adolescence as a time of transition and change for parents, who are starting to deal with limitations in their physical capacities, changes in their appearance, and often reductions in life opportunities at the same time as their children are on the threshold of life with seemingly endless choices and on the cusp of sexual and physical maturation (Silverberg & Steinberg, 1987; Steinberg & Silk, 2002; Steinberg & Steinberg, 1994).

Theorists who emphasize relatively abrupt changes in adolescence seem to focus more on mean-level stability (or the lack thereof) than differential stability because they often are interested in normative change rather than individual differences in patterns of change. They also tend to de-emphasize factors that provide continuity in functioning, and individual differences in this continuity, from childhood into adolescence. Thus, our thinking tends to be based more on models that focus primarily on differential stability.

### *Social Relationships Perspectives*

Models of differential stability differ in the degree to which they view stability as due to stability in the quality of relationships or in characteristics of the parent or child, or in a combination of the two. One set of conceptual models focusing on the quality of relationships has been labeled as *social relationships perspectives*. In general, a social relationships perspective assumes that there is considerable stability in the quality of parent-child relationships and, hence, in the quality of their interactions, even as the child moves into adolescence (Collins & Laursen, 2004). Thus, youths with secure attachments and with warm, supportive relationships with their parents in childhood are expected to maintain those relations, at least to a moderate degree. In contrast, increased conflict and general deterioration of the relationship are more likely when the parent-child relationship was of poor quality in childhood, as youths express their growing dissatisfaction with how they are treated (Collins & Laursen, 2004). Consequently, from a social relationships perspective, it is likely that the degree of conflict in adolescence is related to parental supportive parenting in childhood, as well as with youths' negativity/positivity toward, and attachment with, parents in childhood. A social relationships perspective also suggests that there is some differential stability in the general quality of the parent-child relationship, that individual differences in mean level changes from childhood to adolescence are related to earlier quality of the relationship, and that the

quality of the relationship in adolescence can be predicted from a range of relationship variables assessed in childhood.

Although limited in number, findings from longitudinal research provide some support for social relationships perspectives (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Conger & Ge, 1999; Kim et al. 2001; Loeber et al., 2000). For example, researchers have found some evidence of differential stability in parental punitiveness (Eisenberg et al., 1999), aversive discipline (Vuchnich, Bank, & Patterson, 1992), positive and negative expression of emotion in the home across childhood and into early (Eisenberg et al., 2005) and mid-adolescence (Michalik et al., 2007), and in parent-adolescent conflict discussions across adolescence (Conger & Ge, 1999; Kim et al., 2001; McGue et al., 2005). Similarly, youths' negative affect toward parents in conflict situations tends to be correlated across time (Kim et al., 2001).

There are a variety of mechanisms that could account for the differential stability of the quality of parent-child relationships, including as reflected in the quality of parent-adolescent emotional communications during potentially conflictual discussions. As already mentioned, warm supportive relationships are likely to foster a pattern of interactions in a dyad that perpetuate positive-affective communication between parent and child. Moreover, when parents are warm and sensitive with their children, their children are likely to develop secure attachments (Thompson, 2006). Children with secure attachments tend to develop working models of relationships that are positive and constructive and these models are expected to influence the quality of their relationships and emotion communication in the future (e.g., Kochanska, Aksan, & Carlson, 2005). However, the stability of attachment status over time is modest, and children tend to maintain a secure attachment primarily when the family is not overly stressed and the parent remains sensitive to the child's needs (Thompson, 2006). Nonetheless, adolescents' security of attachment has been positively related to observed parent-child relatedness (validating statements, displays of engagement, and empathy with the other party and their statements) when discussing a past disagreement, as well as youths' perceptions of maternal supportiveness (Allen et al., 2003).

In adolescence and early adulthood, security of attachment (Kobak & Sceery, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005) and parental positivity versus negativity (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2005) have been linked to adolescents' regulation, which would be expected to affect the quality of youths' emotional experience and expressivity, as well as problem behaviors that involve affect regulation (e.g., externalizing and internalizing problems; Allen, Moore, Kuperminc, & Bell, 1998). Thus, the associations of relationship quality during childhood with adolescents' later behavior with their parents, as well as parents' reactions to their adolescents, may be partly mediated through aspects of children's socioemotional functioning (e.g., self-regula-

tion, proneness to negative emotion; Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). Other mechanisms by which supportive parents may foster children's positive expressivity are discussed shortly.

### *Perspectives Emphasizing Stability of Dispositional Characteristics*

Whereas a social relationships perspective highlights continuity in development due to the stability of quality of relationships, the accentuation principle proposed by Elder and Caspi (1990) emphasizes continuity from childhood to adolescence due to the stability of personality and related behaviors (and could also explain mean levels of change for individuals with specific dispositions). According to Elder and Caspi (1990), adaptive responses are shaped by the requirements of new situations, but also vary based on the social and psychological resources individuals bring to new situations. They describe the accentuation principle as referring to "the increase in emphasis or salience of these already prominent characteristics during social transitions in the life course" (p. 294). Specifically, this perspective focuses on how pre-existing psychological dispositions are accentuated during times of stress and transition (such as the transition into adolescence) and foster differential continuity rather than discontinuity. The accentuation argument is that during times of challenge (such as transitions), people assimilate new experiences into their already existing behavior and coping repertoire (also see Block, 1982). Thus, for example, Elder et al. (Elder, Caspi, & Van Nguyen, 1986) found that already existing tendencies such as irritability or the tendency to explode when angered became more extreme during times of economic hardship.

Similarly, Caspi et al. (Caspi, Elder, & Bem, 1987, 1988) differentiated cumulative continuity and interactional continuity; these mechanisms are logically linked with the accentuation principle. *Cumulative continuity* refers to a person's dispositionally guided selection and construction of environments; the argument is that a person's dispositional characteristics can lead him or her to select or construct environments that reinforce and sustain those dispositions. For example, well-regulated people may select situations that provide sufficient structure or lack of distracting stimuli and thereby enhance their ability to focus attention and act in regulated ways. Caspi et al. (1987, 1988) suggested that cumulative continuity is responsible for many of the enduring individual differences across the life course.

In contrast, *interactional continuity* refers to continuity resulting from the reciprocal, dynamic transaction between a person and the environment. It reflects the continuing cycle of a person acting, the environment reacting, and the person reacting back. Caspi et al. argued that this general process