Exploring Actor and Partner Effects in Associations Between Marriage and Parenting for Mothers and Fathers

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SYNOPSIS

Objective. The authors assessed positive and negative qualities of mothers’ and fathers’ marital interaction behavior in relation to each parent’s observed parenting sensitivity, applying the actor–partner interdependence model. Marital behaviors expressed (actor effects) and marital behaviors experienced (partner effects) were distinguished to explore spillover processes between marriage and parenting for mothers and fathers. Design. Positive and negative marital interaction behaviors of 70 mothers and fathers were rated from observations of a discussion task when children were in first grade. Parental sensitivity was represented by a latent factor derived from observational ratings of mother–child and father–child interactions in Grades 1, 3, and 5. Results. Experiences of marital hostility and marital withdrawal from their spouse undermined mothers’ and fathers’ parenting sensitivity (partner effects), controlling for each parent’s own marital behaviors (actor effects) and each parent’s psychological adjustment. Expressed supportive marital behavior was positively related to mothers’ and fathers’ own parenting sensitivity (actor effects), controlling for marital behaviors experienced and the parent’s psychological adjustment. Conclusions. Partner effects for negative marital behaviors and actor effects for positive marital behaviors insinuate associations between marriage and parenting. Predictions from marital qualities to parenting are similar for mothers and fathers.

INTRODUCTION

Marital and parenting relationships have been linked in a large body of literature. Most studies provide support for a spillover hypothesis, suggesting that conflicted, discordant marriages are associated with more problematic parent–child relationships and healthier marital relationships are associated with more positive parent–child relationships (Belsky & Jaffee, 2006; Erel & Burman, 1995; Grych, 2002; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). Addressing the need for more specification of this association (Grych, 2002), some studies have provided greater differentiation of the marital qualities. Others have examined potential mediating factors or mechanisms. We argue that additional information about spillover processes can be gained by measuring each partner’s behavior in marital interactions rather than relying on dyadic-level measures of the relationship. By examining the behavior of each parent in the marital dyad, we distinguished between marital interaction behaviors expressed (actor effects) and those experienced (partner effects) in the spillover between marriage and mothers’ and fathers’ parenting. We applied the actor–partner interdependence model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), which is particularly appropriate to this examination of associations between parents’ marital interaction behaviors and their parenting sensitivity.
Distinctions Between Marital Behaviors Expressed and Experienced in Relation to Parenting

Most studies of connections between marital and parenting relationships have used self-reported measures of general marital functioning or have assessed dyadic qualities of the marital relationship without differentiating between the marital behaviors of mothers and fathers (for the few exceptions, see Cox, Paley, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999; Macfie, Houts, Pressel, & Cox, 2008; Margolin, Gordis, & Oliver, 2004). The methodological practice of analyzing marital functioning at the dyadic level has long been promoted (e.g., Berscheid, 1986; Cairns, 1977), but additional insight into links between marital and parenting relationships may be gained from differentiating between the behaviors mothers and fathers experience from their spouse and those they express to their spouses in their interactions with each other.

The importance of examining marital behavior in terms of expressed and experienced behavior can be seen in a study of associations between husband-to-wife aggression and parenting (Margolin et al., 2004). The link between marriage and parenting appeared to represent a different process for mothers who experienced aggressive behaviors from their spouses than for the fathers who were aggressive with their wives. Fathers who were more aggressive with their wives were less empathic with their children; however, mothers who experienced their husbands’ aggressive behaviors were more hostile but not less empathic with their children. These distinctions would have been lost with a dyadic-level measure of marital aggression. The findings, stemming from analyses of each partner’s behavior in marital interactions, provide evidence for actor effects for fathers and partner effects for mothers in associations between marital aggression and parenting.

It has been assumed that negative experiences in the marital relationship are likely to serve as a source of stress that undermines parenting, and positive marital experiences may serve to strengthen parenting confidence and skills. This notion of the marital relationship as a determinant of parenting via its stress and support function has been articulated by Belsky (e.g., Belsky, 1984; Belsky & Jaffe, 2006) and suggests partner-effect processes. He speculated that when parents are struggling to cope with stress from their marital relationship, they lack the energy and emotional capacity needed to respond sensitively to their children. Preoccupation with difficulties in the marital relationship is likely to interfere with the mental resources, energy, and attention needed for parenting, resulting in less parental responsiveness and warmth. Consistent with this perspective, and using observational assessments of each parent’s marital conflict and withdrawal behavior, one study found that mothers’ hostility toward her spouse was associated with role reversal in father–child interactions, and fathers’ withdrawal from the mother was related to role reversal in mother–child interactions (Macfie et al., 2008). Such findings point to links between stressful interactions experienced in marital interaction and mothers’ and fathers’ parenting, especially with regard to experiences of hostility or conflict and spousal withdrawal from the marital interaction. It should be noted, however, that most studies have not examined partner effects, or associations between one partner’s marital behavior and the other spouse’s parenting, while controlling for actor effects, or associations between the parent’s own marital and parenting qualities. We examined the expected spillover between negative marital interactions and poorer parenting qualities by simultaneously examining actor and partner effects in links between marital hostility and withdrawal with parenting.
Associations between the experience of positive, supportive marital qualities and parenting have been studied less frequently than associations with stressful, conflictual marital relationships (for some exceptions, see Fauchier & Margolin, 2004; Frosch & Mangelsdorf, 2001). However, because the presence of marital negativity does not imply the absence of positive behaviors in the marriage, nor does the absence of negative features in the marital relationship ensure the presence of positive features (Christensen & Walczynski, 1997), study of positive and negative indices of marital functioning is important, and both are included in the present study.

In general, it has been assumed that experiences of support and warmth in the marriage are likely to extend to emotional and instrumental support for parenting, leading to greater availability and warmth in the parenting relationship (Belsky & Jaffe, 2006) via partner effects (Bonds & Gondoli, 2007). Similar arguments have been made for associations found between close and confiding marital relationships and greater parenting sensitivity in infancy (Cox, Owen, Henderson, & Lewis, 1989) and links between more affectionate marriages and warmer parenting with older children (Miller, Cowan, Cowan, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1993). In these studies, marital closeness was rated at the dyadic level, and thus distinctions were not made between what individual partners experienced and what they expressed in marital interactions. It is therefore possible that the associations found between positive marital qualities and positive parenting qualities may be either a product of a behavioral style that is expressed similarly in marital and parenting relationships, an actor effect, or result from the experience of support in the marriage, a partner effect.

Distinguishing Between Marital Hostility and Withdrawal

Research has pointed to the importance of a more differentiated measurement of marital conflict. Some have found stronger links with parenting for marital withdrawal than hostility (Cox et al., 1999). Others have found that associations of parenting with marital hostility and withdrawal differ for mothers and fathers (Macfie et al., 2008; Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006). For example, for fathers, marital withdrawal was more strongly associated with emotional unavailability toward the child than was marital hostility, but hostility and withdrawal were linked with greater emotional unavailability of mothers with their children. Following the model of these studies, we included measures of marital hostility and marital withdrawal as different indicators of negative marital qualities expressed and experienced by mothers and by fathers.

Psychological Adjustment

Some studies have included measures of parents’ psychological adjustment or personality characteristics as possible underlying factors common to marriage and parenting that might explain links between behaviors in both relationship contexts (Grych, 2002). In support of a common factor hypothesis, personality characteristics were related similarly to marital functioning and parent–child relationships (Engfer, 1988) and partially explained the link between marital and parent–child relationships. The moderating role of adult depressive symptoms in associations between interparental discord and poor parenting practices also provides some support for the common factor hypothesis, given that interparental discord was especially detrimental for maternal
acceptance of their children when mothers were depressed (Davies, Sturge-Apple, & Cummings, 2004). We included a measure of personal psychological adjustment in our analyses of associations between marital behavior and parenting sensitivity.

In sum, using the actor–partner interdependence model, we examined associations of mothers’ and fathers’ supportive, withdrawal, and hostile marital interaction behaviors with parenting sensitivity in mother–child and father–child interactions, while controlling for personal psychological adjustment. Application of this model enabled us to simultaneously estimate the effects of marital behaviors experienced on parenting sensitivity (partner effects) controlling for the effects of marital behaviors expressed on parenting, as well as estimate the effects of marital behaviors expressed on parenting (actor effects) controlling for the effects of marital behaviors experienced, while controlling for the similarities or interdependence between husbands’ and wives’ marital interaction behavior. We analyzed mothers and fathers as distinguishable partners, given the different roles of males and females in these relationships. Furthermore, use of an actor–partner interdependence model allowed us to assess all three aspects of marital interaction and their interdependence in a single model. We used the observational ratings of parenting sensitivity collected in the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development and observational ratings of marital interactions collected as site-specific data in one of the study sites when the children were in first grade. Building on the strength of the study’s longitudinal measures of parenting, a latent construct representing parenting sensitivity in middle childhood was formed from the assessments of mother–child and father–child interactions collected when the children were in first, third, and fifth grade.

METHOD

Participants

The participants for this study were 70 two-parent families from the Wisconsin site of the multisite National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. Only families from the one site are included because the marital interaction observations were collected only at this site. Sixty-eight of the couples were married, and two couples were cohabiting stably since the child’s birth. Participants’ annual family income averaged $63,188 (SD = $27,835) when the study child was in first grade (1997–1998) and the children averaged 6.88 years (SD = .29 years). Fathers’ education averaged 14.78 years (SD = 2.63 years, range = 11 to 21 years), and mothers’ education averaged 14.90 years (SD = 2.61 years, range = 10 to 21 years). The sample was predominantly European American (94%); 57% of the children were girls. Additional details about recruitment and data collection procedures of the larger study are documented in the study’s Manuals of Operation (http://secc.rti.org).

Overview of Procedures

Marital interactions were collected in home visits when the children were in first grade (M = 6.88 years, SD = .29 years). Parenting measures included semi-structured observations of mother–child and father–child interactions collected in home and
lab visits when children were in Grades 1, 3, and 5. The marital interaction procedure was conducted in a separate home visit after collecting the first-grade parent-child interactions. Questionnaire measures of parents’ psychological adjustment were collected during the first-grade visits in which the parent-child interactions were collected.

Measures

Marital interaction. Qualities of mothers’ and fathers’ behavior in a marital interaction were rated from a 15-min videotaped couple discussion task conducted in the couple’s home. After a warm-up period, couples were asked to discuss an imagined financial crisis for 7 min. Couples were instructed to “imagine that their financial situation had become so bad that they must move in with one of their families” and to “discuss which family they would choose to live with, why they would make that choice, and what they would see as the consequences.” This seemingly more benign discussion task pertaining to family-of-origin relationships and problem solving has been used successfully in previous studies assessing positive and negative marital qualities, with valid variability in ratings (see Cox et al., 1989; Owen & Cox, 1997).

We used an adaptation of the System for Coding Interactions in Dyads (Kaczynski, Lindahl, Malik, & Laurenceau, 2006; Malik & Lindahl, 2004) to assess husbands’ and wives’ marital behaviors (Klausli, 2002). The System for Coding Interactions in Dyads includes a 5-point Likert-type global rating scale, ranging from 1 (very low) to 5 (high), of affective and communicative functioning of individuals in couple interactions. Ratings of the husband’s and the wife’s behavior were made with separate passes through the taped interaction. Negative behavior rating scales included verbal aggression, nonverbal negativity/conflict, and withdrawal. We rescaled the verbal aggression scale from the original to distinguish more subtle expressions of verbal aggression. We also included an adapted scale from the System for Coding Interactions in Dyads for nonverbal expressions of negativity and conflict. Behaviors such as eye rolling, negative facial expressions, and sighs were signs of nonverbal negativity and conflict. Withdrawal was coded high when a spouse did not engage in the interaction by avoiding eye contact; by appearing flat, bored, or disinterested; and by stating, for example, “I don’t care,” I have nothing else to say,” “I am done with this conversation.”

The positive behavior rating scales included problem-solving communication and support. Spouses who scored high in problem-solving communication expressed their feelings and thoughts openly and responded respectfully and positively even when negative topics were discussed. A spouse scoring high on support was attuned to and acknowledged the partner’s emotional needs by listening attentively, reading the other’s emotional signals, and encouraging the partner to express his or her feelings and thoughts.

On the basis of conceptual groupings of scales and the supportive results of correlational analyses of associations among the individual ratings, run separately for mothers and fathers, we formed composites to capture positive and negative aspects of marital functioning. We found similar results for mothers’ and fathers’ marital ratings. Two consistent marital behavior composites were formed for mothers and fathers: (1) support, the sum of support and problem solving communication ($\alpha = .78$ and .83 for mothers and fathers, respectively); and (2) hostility, the sum of verbal aggression and verbal negativity/conflict ($\alpha = .77$ and .58 for mothers and fathers, respectively). Despite
relatively low internal consistency for the father hostility composite measure, it was retained to maintain the formation of similar marital interaction behavior composites for mothers and fathers. The low internal consistency coefficient was likely a product of the relative infrequency of ratings above a “1” for verbal aggression in these interactions. The third measure of marital behavior was the *withdrawal* rating scale. This scale was not composited with other scales because it was conceptually distinct and had low, and mostly nonsignificant, correlations with all the other scales.

One third of the interactions were independently coded by two raters to measure interrater reliability. A single master coder was not designated; analyzed ratings came from all coders. We examined the interrater reliability coefficients of the ratings, on the basis of 35% of the interactions, using correlations of the composite scores derived from the ratings of each rater and percentage agreement on each rating. Intraclass correlation indices of reliability (Winer, 1971) for the marital composites were .82 for mothers’ negativity, .71 for fathers’ negativity, .81 for mothers’ support, and .64 for fathers’ support. Percentage agreement within 1 point was above 89% for each of the 10 scales.

To validate the marital behavior composites formed from the ratings of marital interaction behavior qualities, correlations were examined between the marital interaction composites from first grade and the mothers’ self-reports of marital functioning using a questionnaire by Braiker and Kelly (1979) collected when the study child was 1 month old (but not subsequently) and parents’ reports of marital conflict resolution (Rands, Levinger, & Meninger, 1981) in sixth grade. Mothers’ and fathers’ observed hostility in the marital interaction were related to maternal reports of greater marital ambivalence: $r(67) = .25, p < .05$, for mothers; and $r(67) = .26, p < .05$, for fathers. Mothers’ reports of marital ambivalence were also related to less supportive marital behaviors of mothers, $r(67) = -.28, p < .05$.

Observations of parenting sensitivity. Parenting behaviors were observed in 15-min mother–child and father–child interaction tasks that were videotaped in the child’s first-, third-, and fifth-grade year. Interaction tasks for mothers and for fathers were designed to be age appropriate and to place similar demands on mother–child and father–child dyads across the different ages. The Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development measure of parenting sensitivity is well established and validated with respect to associations with children’s social-emotional and cognitive development (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2001, 2004, 2008).

The first-grade mother–child interaction tasks included drawing a house and tree together using an Etch-A-Sketch; assisting the child fill geometric frames with parquet pattern blocks; and a card game similar to Slap-Jack. The first-grade father–child activities included drawing a sailboat with an Etch-A-Sketch, forming three block designs pictured on Color Cube Task Cards, and playing the card game Slap-Jack.

The third-grade interaction tasks with mother included a rules discussion task and an errand planning task. Father–child interaction tasks included the same rules discussion task but with different rules and a card sorting and sequencing task.

The fifth-grade mother–child and father–child interaction tasks included a “hot topics” discussion task and a collaboration/building task. The collaborative building task for mother–child dyads was to construct a bungee-jump for a raw egg, and the task for father–child dyads was to build a tower from toothpicks and clay.
The interactions were coded with global rating scales modified for age appropriateness at each time period (Owen, Klausli, & Murrey, 2000). The ratings were reported on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (very low) to 7 (very high). Composite measures for maternal and paternal sensitivity were formed from the sum of the rating scales supportive presence, respect for child autonomy, and hostility (reversed). Internal reliability for the sensitivity composites ranged from .78 to .85.

Different teams of coders rated the parent–child interaction tapes at the different ages, with one or two coders overlapping across two time periods. Intrarater reliabilities determined from intraclass correlations ranged from .70 to .89 for the individual ratings and from .80 to .91 for the sensitivity composite across the different ages. Marital and parent–child interactions were coded by nonoverlapping teams of coders.

Parent adjustment covariates. Composite variables representing each parent’s psychological adjustment at first grade were formed from measures of depressive symptoms (Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale; Radloff, 1977), state anxiety (State-Trait Anxiety Inventory; Spielberger, Gorsuch, Lushene, Vagg, & Jacobs, 1983), and state anger (anger subscale of the State-Trait Anger Scale; Spielberger, Jacobs, Russell, & Crane, 1983). A latent variable was formed with indicators of self report measures of depression, anxiety, and anger for each parent with standardized loadings of 1.00, .60, and .51, for depression, anxiety, and anger, respectively, for maternal psychological adjustment; and with loadings of 1.00, .63, and .43, for depression, anxiety, and anger, respectively, for paternal psychological adjustment.

Analysis Plan

We applied the actor–partner interdependence model (Kenny et al., 2006) to the data to address questions regarding the relative importance of marital behaviors experienced and expressed in links with parenting. The model addresses actor effects (e.g., the association of mothers’ expressed marital behavior and her parenting) and partner effects (e.g., the association of mothers’ experience of marital hostility from the father and her parenting). This approach enabled us to simultaneously estimate the effects of a parent’s marital behaviors on his or her spouse’s parenting (a partner effect), while controlling for the association between the parent’s own marital and parenting behaviors (an actor effect), and estimate actor effects while controlling for partner effects. We tested the actor–partner interdependence model of relationships between husbands’ and wives’ marital behaviors and parenting using structural equation modeling with AMOS 5.0 (Arbuckle, 2003). A simplified representation of the model is shown in Figure 1. We included the three marital behavior quality ratings of hostility, support, and withdrawal rated individually for mothers and fathers as observed predictor variables of parenting. Outcome variables were latent constructs of mothers’ and fathers’ sensitive parenting indicated by maternal and paternal parenting sensitivity composites from Grades 1, 3, and 5. We included mothers’ and fathers’ psychological adjustment in the model as controls and represented as latent variables with indicators of self-report measures of depression, anxiety, and anger.

In the actor–partner interdependence model, mothers and fathers were treated as distinguishable members of the marital dyad. Empirical support for this assumption was
addressed by examining the fit of an alternate interchangeable and saturated model (Olsen & Kenny, 2006), which constrained the following parameters as equivalent for wives and husbands: the actor and partner paths, means, and variances of the exogenous marital variables, intercepts of the parenting outcomes, covariances between the exogenous marital variables, and the error variances of the latent parenting outcomes. The fit of this model was poor, \( \chi^2(124) = 281.5 \), comparative fit index = .727, incremental fit index = .748, root mean square error of approximation = .136, and significantly worse than the fit described below of the proposed model \( (\Delta \chi^2/\Delta df = 158) \), supporting the appropriateness of the distinguishability assumption in the actor–partner interdependence model.

RESULTS

Mean Differences in Marital Behavior and Parenting Sensitivity Between Mothers and Fathers

Means and standard deviations of predictor and outcome variables and results of \( t \) test comparisons between scores for mothers and fathers can be found in the right two columns of Table 1. Mothers showed more marital support behavior than fathers, \( t(69) = 1.97, p = .05 \), and fathers showed more withdrawal in the marital interaction than mothers, \( t(69) = -1.96, p = .05 \), but mothers and fathers did not differ in the amount of hostility they displayed with each other, \( t(69) = 1.14 \). Parenting sensitivity of mothers and fathers did not differ in first and fifth grades, \( t(65) = 1.11 \), and \( t(52) = -1.17 \), respectively, but fathers were rated as more sensitive than mothers in third grade, \( t(57) = -2.05, p < .05 \).
### TABLE 1

Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations for Marital and Parenting Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Marital support (mother)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.70***</td>
<td>−.52**</td>
<td>−.43***</td>
<td>−.46***</td>
<td>−.19</td>
<td>.43***</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td>−.16</td>
<td>6.29</td>
<td>(1.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Marital support (father)</td>
<td></td>
<td>−.22*</td>
<td>−.39**</td>
<td>−.43***</td>
<td>−.41***</td>
<td>.46***</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>−.11</td>
<td>−.24*</td>
<td>5.97</td>
<td>(1.79)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Marital hostility (mother)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.71***</td>
<td>−.11</td>
<td>−.09</td>
<td>−.21</td>
<td>−.27*</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>−.16</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>(1.33)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Marital hostility (father)</td>
<td></td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>−.29*</td>
<td>−.19</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>−.22</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>(1.86)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Marital withdrawal (mother)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.49***</td>
<td>−.12</td>
<td>−.30*</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>(1.04)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Marital withdrawal (father)</td>
<td></td>
<td>−.34**</td>
<td>−.18</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>(1.13)</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Parenting sensitivity (mother)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.26*</td>
<td>−.15</td>
<td>−.11</td>
<td>17.19</td>
<td>(1.72)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Parenting sensitivity (father)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>−.12</td>
<td>17.30</td>
<td>(1.80)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Psychological adjustment (mother)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>(88)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Psychological adjustment (father)</td>
<td></td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>(79)</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

*Note. df = 69.*

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

### Bivariate Relations Between Marital Relationships and Parenting

Results of correlational analyses of bivariate relations between marital and parenting behaviors are also shown in Table 1. Results give initial support for associations between marital behaviors experienced and parenting sensitivity as well as between marital behaviors expressed and parenting sensitivity. Support for the notion of behavioral patterns expressed across relational contexts could be found from the significant associations between mothers’ marital behaviors and mothers’ parenting sensitivity and between fathers’ marital behaviors and fathers’ parenting sensitivity. More supportive marital behavior and less hostile behavior of mothers were associated with more sensitive mothering. More supportive marital behavior of fathers was associated with more sensitive fathering, but the correlation between fathers’ marital hostility and fathers’ parenting was not significant. Mothers’ and fathers’ withdrawal in the marital interaction was not significantly correlated with either of their own parenting.

We found support for associations between marital behaviors experienced and parenting sensitivity for mothers and fathers from significant correlations linking fathers’ marital behaviors with mothers’ parenting and linking mothers’ marital behaviors with fathers’ parenting. In addition, we found support for the stress and support carryover process for all three indices of marital functioning. When fathers were more supportive, less hostile, and less withdrawn toward their wives, wives were more sensitive with their children. Similarly, when mothers were more supportive, less hostile, and less withdrawn with their husbands, husbands were more sensitive with their children.
Examining Actor and Partner Effects in Associations Between Martial Behaviors and Parenting Sensitivity

An actor–partner interdependence model was fit to the data to examine joint contributions of each spouse’s marital interaction behaviors to each spouse’s parenting sensitivity (both actor and partner effects) while controlling for the similarities or interdependence of the couple dyads (intraclass correlations). Model fit was good (Bentler, 1990; Brown & Cudeck, 1993), \( \chi^2(96) = 123.5 \), comparative fit index = .94, the incremental fit index = .95, and root mean square error of approximation = .06 (CI [.021, .095]). Path coefficients (and standard errors) resulting from testing the hypothesized model can be found in Table 2.

Parenting sensitivities of mothers and fathers, represented by latent variables, are indicated by the observational composite ratings of sensitivity from Grades 1, 3, and 5. The measurement models were reasonable for mothers, \( \chi^2(1) = .071 \), root mean square error of approximation = .00 (CI [.00, .21]), with standardized loadings of 1.00, .98, and .60, for Grades 1, 3, and 5, respectively, for maternal sensitivity; and for fathers, \( \chi^2(1) = .3 \), root mean square error of approximation = .00 (CI [.00, .26]), with loadings of 1.00, .55, and .36, respectively, for paternal sensitivity. The paths from parents’ psychological adjustment to maternal parenting and paternal parenting were not significant in the model.

**Partner effects.** As shown in Table 2, the structural path from mothers’ marital withdrawal to fathers’ parenting sensitivity was significant, as was the structural path from fathers’ marital withdrawal to mothers’ parenting sensitivity, indicating partner effects in the links between marital withdrawal and parenting. Mothers and fathers whose partners were more withdrawn in marital interactions were observed to be less sensitive with their children.

The structural path from mothers’ marital hostility to fathers’ parenting sensitivity was also significant, and the structural path from fathers’ marital hostility to mothers’ parenting sensitivity was nearly significant \( (p = .07) \). These two paths were not different

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Actor and Partner Path Coefficients From the Tested Actor–Partner Interdependence Model Relating Marital Variables to Mothers’ and Fathers’ Parenting Sensitivity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Measure</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers’ marital support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mothers’ marital hostility</td>
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<td>Mothers’ marital withdrawal</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fathers’ marital support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fathers’ marital hostility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fathers’ marital withdrawal</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Path coefficients for psychological adjustment were nonsignificant and are not shown but are available on request.

\* \( p < .05 \), \** \( p < .01 \).
from one another, as determined by follow-up analyses. Fathers who experienced higher levels of marital hostility from their wives were less sensitive towards their children.

Actor effects. The structural path from mothers’ marital support to mothers’ parenting sensitivity was significant. Results indicated that mothers who showed higher levels of marital support to their husbands were more sensitive to their children. Similarly, an actor effect was indicated from estimates of the structural path between fathers’ marital support and fathers’ parenting sensitivity. Fathers who displayed higher levels of marital support to their wives were more sensitive toward their children. We found no actor effects in the tested model for negative marital behaviors for either fathers or mothers.

DISCUSSION

To extend previous research on the linkage between marital and parent–child relationships, we measured marital interactions at the individual level with ratings of mothers’ behaviors and fathers’ behaviors rather than depicting marital quality at the dyadic level to assess associations of marital behaviors expressed and experienced by each spouse with the sensitivity of mothers’ and fathers’ parenting. This distinction parallels actor (expressed behavior) and partner (experienced behavior) effects as specified in the actor–partner interdependence model, which we used to examine associations between marital interactions and parent–child interactions. We investigated positive and negative indices of marital functioning including supportive behavior, hostility, and withdrawal.

Using an actor–partner interdependence model, we examined partner effects of marital qualities on parenting, controlling for actor effects, and we examined actor effects of marital qualities on parenting, controlling for partner effects. In addition, we examined actor and partner effects in this model, controlling for the dependencies between spouses’ marital interaction behaviors. We included measures of each partner’s psychological adjustment in the model, but paths from psychological adjustment were not significant, and we found no support that psychological adjustment constituted a common factor accounting for associations between marital and parenting relationships.

The actor–partner interdependence model provided evidence for partner effects for hostility and withdrawal on mothers’ and fathers’ parenting sensitivity. Fathers who experienced more marital hostility or marital withdrawal from their wives were less sensitive in father–child interactions than fathers who experienced less marital hostility or withdrawal from their wives. Partner effects of marital behavior on mothers’ parenting sensitivity were similar. Mothers whose husbands were more withdrawn in marital interactions were less sensitive in interactions with their children, and the path from mothers’ experience of marital hostility was nearly significant. These results give further insight into the spillover hypothesis in the following ways: They suggest that experiencing withdrawal or hostility from the marital partner undermines mothers’ and fathers’ sensitivity in parenting consistent with the role of marital stress depicted in Belsky’s determinants of parenting model (Belsky, 1984; Belsky & Jaffe, 2006). It should be noted that these partner effects were discerned controlling for actor effects of associations between positive and negative qualities of the parent’s own marital behavior with his or her parenting sensitivity.
Stimulated by the findings of Sturge-Apple and colleagues (2006) that marital withdrawal and hostility in couple interactions were related to less connection in the mother–child dyad, we examined both of these features in couple interactions. Our results expand on findings regarding the role of marital withdrawal (Macfie et al., 2008; Sturge-Apple et al., 2006) by distinguishing between experienced and expressed behavior (partner and actor effects). In doing so, we found that links between both marital hostility and marital withdrawal and less parenting sensitivity of both mothers and fathers take the form of partner effects, and do not appear to be the result of actor effects.

The results revealed actor effects in the associations between marital support and parenting sensitivity, suggesting that the spillover of positive marital behaviors to positive parenting qualities is a product of positive behaviors expressed by parents in both relationship contexts rather than effects stemming from the experience of supportive behaviors in the marriage. This suggests that previous associations found in the literature between supportive marital relationships and parenting that were based on dyadic measures of marital quality may be better understood as a product of positive relationship styles manifest across both marital and parent–child relationships.

Bonds and Gondoli (2007) argued that their study results suggest that experience of coparenting support from the husband is particularly important for positive mother–child relationships. The present study results differ, however, in finding significant actor effect paths from marital support to positive parenting, but no significant partner effect paths from marital support. Moreover, the actor effects between the parent’s own supportive marital behavior and his or her sensitive parenting were found for both mothers and fathers. Note, too, that these effects of marital support were found in a model that controlled for associations of parenting sensitivity with negative marital behaviors. The actor–partner interdependence model provides a stringent test of these associations, given that partner effects are net of actor effects and actor effects are net of partner effects. The actor effects in our study are consistent with the contention that mothers practice positive behaviors across different relational contexts (Magrab, 1979); the analogous actor effect of marital support on parenting for fathers indicates that the practice of supportive behavior across different relationships is not limited to females.

Evidence for Different Associations for Mothers and Fathers

Many investigators have argued that fathers are more susceptible than mothers to the influence of the marital relationship, especially with respect to marital conflict (e.g., Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000), but others have questioned the evidence for such conclusions (e.g., Coiro & Emery, 1998; Erel & Burman, 1995). Results from our study indicate that mothers and fathers are similarly affected by experiences of marital hostility and partner withdrawal in the marital relationship. Despite the theoretical assumption and strong empirical evidence that husbands and wives should be distinguished by their gender in the analyses of pathways between marital and parenting behavior, the paths between partner hostility and parenting, and between partner withdrawal and parenting, did not differ for mothers and fathers. Mothers’ and fathers’ parenting appeared to be similarly undermined with the experience of withdrawal in marital interaction by the spouse, as indicated by the spouse’s avoidance of engagement or displays of disinterest in the marital interaction. Although the path from marital
hostility to less sensitive parenting was significant for fathers but only marginally significant for mothers, these path estimates did not differ significantly. In addition, we found evidence for an actor effect linking parent marital support behavior with parenting sensitivity for mothers and fathers. Thus, we found no evidence for parent gender differences in the associations between marital and parenting relationships.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Strengths of our study include the use of observational measures and independent ratings of marital and parenting behavior rather than self-reports of relationship qualities, thus removing the shared method variance confound of the many studies that have used self-reports. In addition, the assessment of marital behaviors of each partner allowed for examination of marital interactions in terms of experienced and expressed behaviors for each partner.

Several limitations of the study should be noted. First, study participants from the Wisconsin site of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development were predominantly European American and the two-parent families were predominantly middle class. The findings may be limited to similar populations and may not be generalizable to families from other cultures or with fewer resources. Further study of these processes is needed with samples that reflect more cultural and economic diversity.

The design of the study, with marital interaction observed at a single time and concurrent and subsequent measures of parenting sensitivity, promotes a direction-of-effects interpretation that is also reflected in much of the literature on marriage and parenting. This is unfortunate. Because we collected data on marital interaction only in first grade, there was no ability to consider reciprocal influences of parenting on the marital relationship, with either a lagged analysis, examining effects of earlier parenting sensitivity on later marital interaction qualities, or a cross-lagged panel analysis, comparing effects of earlier marital qualities on later parenting and earlier parenting on marital qualities.

Another limitation stems from concerns about the validity of the discussion task procedure to assess the quality of marital interactions. The procedure consisted of a single discussion topic and was relatively brief—8 min. The discussion prompt, which asked the couple to choose whom they would live with if a financial crisis required them to live with one of their families of origin, elicited individual differences in how the couple worked together to solve a (hypothetical) problem and promoted discussion of potentially different perspectives about families of origin. Discussion of actual couple disagreements, or a revealed differences task, is more widely used in studies of couple interaction quality than the imagined scenario used in this study. Support for our procedure, however, is found from evidence of its validity derived from mothers’ self-ratings of marital quality support and associations found with parenting sensitivity. Nonetheless, the patterns found for actor and partner effects on parenting from positive and negative qualities of marital interactions may be limited in some respects to marital qualities discernible from this relatively benign task. An important future methodological study would be to examine differences in couple interaction ratings from known conflict-laden discussion topics compared to more benign tasks, such as the one used in the present study.
Conclusion

Our study highlights the complexity of the association between marriage and parenting. Measuring the behaviors of each spouse in marital interactions allowed for the distinction between marital behaviors experienced and those expressed to provide evidence for links between marriage and parenting sensitivity via mothers’ and fathers’ experiences of hostility and withdrawal from their spouses (partner effects) and links via the expression of supportive behavior by the parents in marital and parenting relationships (actor effects). A better understanding of these processes of connection between marital and parent–child relationships should help guide parents’ awareness of the interconnected web of family relationships and also provide guidance for interventionists and parent educators seeking to help families provide more sensitive parenting of their children.

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