

What connections between Marital conflict and Parenting Quality?

Evidence from parent's gender in spillover effects

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Abstract

The spillover hypothesis posits that negative emotions and behavioral patterns in marital conflicts influence parenting quality and children's adjustment, through increasing of harsh and incoherent discipline and diminished involvement and affection. Moreover conflicts focused on childrearing issues are particularly distressing for children with often show emotional and behavioral problems.

The aim of the study was to explore gender differences in the links between marital conflicts (destructive and constructive tactics, childrearing disagreement) and parent-child relationships, in order to verify if there are different pathways for fathers and mothers in spillover effects.

110 parents (children aged 6-12 years) completed the Styles of Conflict Scale (marital conflict style), the Parent Problem Checklist (disagreements

about childrearing), the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire (parenting practices), and the Parenting Stress Index.

The links between conflict tactics and parenting practices change in function of parent's gender. Mothers refer more frequent childrearing disagreements and increasing in punishment; furthermore - in line with the spillover hypothesis - attack and violence tactics are associated negatively with positive parenting (involvement and warmth). For fathers compromise, avoidance and attack correlate positively with effective parenting (more involvement, affection and consistency disciplinary).

A spillover effect, that is, an extension of marital tensions in the relationship with their children with reduced quality of parenting, seems to manifest only for women. These findings, if confirmed by other studies, would be relevant from an clinical point of view to understand how paternal and maternal parenting mediate the effects of the marital disharmony on children's adjustment.

Over the past decades the assumption of a systemic perspective (Belsky, 1981) has led developmental and clinical psychologists to investigate the effects of the quality of marriage on children adjustment (Holland & McElwain, 2013; Stroud, Durbin, Wilson & Mendelsohn, 2011). Studies describe that a harmonious marriage is generally associated with sensitive and warm parenting (Belsky, Crnic, & Gable, 1995), whereas disagreement between the spouses, when results in open conflicts, mutual accusations and hostility (both verbal and physical), is associated with a wide variety of problematic outcomes in children such as withdrawal or anxiety, low social competence and self-esteem, non-compliance or aggressive behaviors (Davies, Martin, Cicchetti, 2012).

Troxel e Matthews (2004) proposed that marital conflict, often leading to divorce and family dissolution, influences children's adjustment though changes in the quality of parent-child relationships. This model assumes that the stresses associated with marital conflict compromise the family life both directly (as children observe inter-parental hostility and anger, fill insecure attachment and self-blame), or indirectly through the negative changes in parent-child relationships. Specifically, effects of marital conflicts are mediated by *parenting*, that is, the emotional quality and the concrete behaviors (or *practices*) parents show to children. These changes, named as "spillover effects", describe how the negative emotions and behavioral patterns that characterize marital system will bleed into parent-child dyad (Enger, 1988).

The conceptualization of spillover processes originates from a variety of theoretical perspectives such as the social learning (Patterson, 1982), systems theories including the ecological perspective (Almeida, Wethington, & Chandler, 1999), and family systems framework (Anderson, Lindner, & Bennion, 1992). All these perspectives share the assumption that marital hostility primes subsequent parent-child interaction through the transfer of anger and tension to the parent-child dyad. As consequence, children's psychosocial development can be compromised when marital conflict leads disengagement by parents and negative parent-child interactions.

Particularly, changes in parent-child relationship through spillover processes include (Zimet & Jacob, 2001):

- a) decreasing in involvement, poor parent-child communication, and affection. Parents involved in frequent marital conflicts may be emotionally preoccupied, and less available to recognize and respond to children's emotional needs.
- b) Incoherence in rules, childrearing techniques, and discipline responses to child's behaviors.
- c) Harsh discipline, punishment, and low acceptance. It was observed that high levels of spousal aggression are often linked to high level of aggression toward children as well (Jouriles & LeCompte, 1991). Particularly, these hostile discipline techniques to manage children's behavior are linked consistently to externalizing and internalizing problems in children (Gerard, Krishnakumar, & Buheler, 2006).

Marital distress negatively interfere also with effective co-parenting, that is, the quality of involvement and coordination when the partners collaborate to raise their child (Morrill, Hines, Mahmood, & Córdova, 2010; Stroud, Durbin, Wilson, & Mendelsohn, 2011). Co-parenting is crucial for children's well-being and socialization processes, whereas disagreement about parenting was found associated with increased levels of stress in parents, as well more emotional and behavioral problems in children (Benedetto & Fazzari, 2010; Camisasca, Miragoli, & Di Blasio, 2014).

The family systems literature proposes an alternative model for linking marital conflict and changes in parent-child relationships. According to a compensatory hypothesis (Erel & Burman, 1995), it's possible to observe higher quality in parent-child relations even if partners experience conflicts and marital distress. In other words, a stronger involvement with the child can work as compensation when parent's love and intimacy needs are not

satisfied in marriage. However, whereas there are not many empirical data confirming this compensatory hypothesis, the spillover hypothesis is supported by more robust evidence and meta-analysis (Erel & Burman, 1995; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000).

Other scholars found that marital disagreements affect fathers and mothers differently, considering both the style of the conflict, as well the changes in parent-child relationships. In some studies emerge different behavior patterns in conflict management, from which derives a distinction between destructive and constructive styles (Cummings, 1998). A destructive style is characterized by anger and hostility, verbal or corporal aggression, marital withdrawal which include expressions of detachment and avoidance during marital discussions. In contrast, constructive styles are characterized by parents' efforts in finding a resolution or explanations to the children. Some empirical data show that in difficult marriages women are more likely to directly address the issues of disagreement, whereas men tend to avoid conflict by withdrawing from their wives (Kerig, 1996) or from their children (Howes & Markman, 1989).

These gender differences could be relevant to assume because the specific strategies used to manage or resolve conflicts can predict children's adjustment. In both married and divorced families, Camara and Resnick (1988) found that children were less aggressive when parents had higher parent cooperation scores, but some differences occurred considering fathers' and mothers' conflict styles. When fathers used verbal attack styles, young children show more behavioral problems and lower self-esteem. Mothers' use of verbal attacks as conflict style resulted in withdrawn and more solitary play for their children. Only in divorced families, when mothers used negative and attacking styles for conflict resolution, both the mother-child and father-child relationships were poorer, compared to the families where mothers used compromise strategies.

Regarding on impact of conflict on parenting, some studies suggest that a difficult marriage deteriorates the parent-child relationships more frequently in men than women (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Raymond, 2004), since conflict interfere with sensitive and warm parenting (Owen & Cox, 1997). Other scholars, instead, found the parenting of mothers is more susceptible to negative influences of marital conflict than fathers' parenting (Osborne & Fincham, 1996).

Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings (2006) investigated the connections between hostility and withdrawal in the marriage and maternal and paternal practices. Results show that the withdrawal alone was the strongest

predictor of diminished affective parenting for fathers, whereas marital withdrawal and hostility were both predictors of emotional unavailability for mothers. In conclusion, data on the existence of gender differences in conflict styles managements and changes in paternal or maternal parenting are not linear but complex (Coiro & Emery, 1998; Snyder, 1998).

Research also suggests that the relationship between marital conflict and child maladjustment varies depending on specific qualities or dimensions of the conflict. The negative consequences are more severe and likely to occur when parental conflict is more frequent and intense, unresolved, and focused on child rearing issues (Zimet & Jacob, 2001). McHale, Freitag, Crouter, and Bartko (1991) found that not exposure to conflict, in and itself, but the content of marital conflict was related to adjustment or conduct problems in children. Parents were asked to rate their marital conflict levels (high or low). When conflict levels were high, children's did not report significantly more problems if compared to children whose parents reported lower levels of conflict. Instead, the content of the conflict, specifically disagreement about child-rearing strategies, was linked to child adjustment and conduct problems.

The goal of this study is to explore the links between marital conflicts and parenting practices in intact families by examining whether gender differences emerge in the changes in parent-child relationships. Most studies have focused on a single dimension of parenting, as punishment (Brook, Zheng, Whiteman, & Brook, 2001), emotional unavailability or inconsistent discipline (Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006). Considering that parenting is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct and doesn't correspond to a single parental behavior or quality (Belsky, 1981), the purpose of the study is to analyze multiple dimensions simultaneously, so to analyze the specific connections between marital discord and changes in parenting practices. The practices examined are involvement, warmth towards their own children, inconsistency in discipline and punitive parenting (Frick, Christian, & Wootton, 1999). In particular, the questions are:

1. there are differences between fathers and mothers in the management of marital conflict and disagreements about childrearing?
2. There is a potentiating effect of intra-marital conflict and parental distress?

3. The increased intensity of conflict corresponds to a worse quality of parenting (less warmth and involvement, inconsistency in discipline, and more frequent punishment)?
4. These mutual influences between conflict and parenting are different for fathers and mothers?

Method

Participants

This study involved 110 married parents (mothers $n = 51$; fathers $n = 59$), recruited by two public schools in Messina (Italy), who participated voluntarily after signing their informed consent for the anonymous treatment of the research data. The mean age was 38.5 ($SD = 4.8$) and 41 years ($SD = 4.4$) for mothers and fathers, respectively. On average the parents were married for 13.3 years ($SD = 5.1$). The main number of children for couple was two (ranging from 1 to 4). The children were aged 6-12 years ($M = 8.4$, $SD = 1.4$). Regarding to educational level, this sample resulted medium-high, with 18.3% of the parents taking a degree, 57.8% having a high school diploma, and 23.8 % a middle school certificate. Exclusion factors for this sample were: single/separated condition, blended families, foreign parents and /or mixed couples, parents of children with chronic illness or developmental psychopathology.

Measures

Marital conflict tactics

The *Styles of Conflict Scale* (SCS) in marital relationship by Camara and Resnick (1989) assesses the tactics and outcomes of disagreements between partners. The version used for this study (It. ad. by Lanz, Rosnati & Iafrate, 1997)¹ asks each partner to describe their own style of conflict management and it measures four conflict resolution styles (12 items): verbal attack ($\alpha = .73$, “The more we talk, the madder I get”), compromise ($\alpha = .75$, “I try to reason with him/her”), avoid ($\alpha = .58$, “I try to avoid talking

¹ A later version of this scale (the questionnaire *When we disagree*) measures the conflict between adolescents and parents (Honest, Charman, Zani, Cicognani, Xerri, Jackson, & Bosma, 1997).

about it”), physical anger ($\alpha=.69$, “I get mad and throw things at him/her”).

Conflict over parenting

The *Parent Problem Checklist* (PPC; Dadds & Powell, 1991) is a 16-item questionnaire that measures conflict between partners over child rearing and family management. Six items explore the extent to which parents disagree over rules and discipline for child misbehavior; six items measure the occurrence of open conflict over childrearing issues, and further four items focus on the extent to which parents undermine each other’s relationship with their children. The PPC yields an index of the number of problems (Problem scale) which had good internal consistency in this sample ($\alpha = .81$).

Parenting Stress

The *Parenting Stress Index - Short Form* (PSI-SF; Abidin, 1995) is a self-report rating scale measuring stress related to parenting. The questionnaire is composed of 36 items to which parents responded by rating on a 5-point scale (strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree) to what extent each item describes themselves, their child, or parent-child interactions. The obtained indices are Parental Distress, Difficult Child, and Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction, which are summed up to obtain the Total Stress measure used in this study. Higher scores indicate more stress experienced by the parents with the target child. The internal consistency for the Italian version (Guarino *et al.*, 2008) for the Total stress is $\alpha = .93$.

Parenting practices

The parent report version of the *Alabama Parenting Questionnaire* (APQ; Frick, 1991) assesses different dimensions of parenting. For the scope of this study, the practices measured are: involvement (10 items; e.g., “You have a friendly talk with your child”), positive parenting (6 items; e.g., “You compliment your child when he/she does something well”), inconsistent discipline (6 items; e.g., “The punishment you give your child depends on your mood”), and corporal punishment (3 items; e.g., “You slap your child when he/she has done something wrong”). The first two scales have a positive direction (higher scores indicate positive practices), the other two a negative direction (higher scores correspond to ineffective parenting). Each item was rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always) to indicate how frequently the parent uses every specific behavior for managing child’s behaviors in ordinary interactions. For the Italian version (Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2012) internal consistency ranges from $\alpha = .80$ (involvement scale) to $\alpha = .50$ (corporal punishment).

Results

The data were analyzed using the *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS) 17.0 for Windows. First, descriptive data (Means and Standard Deviations) were calculated for all measures. Gender differences were then tested by separate one-way ANOVAs (for PSI-SF and PPC measures) and MANOVAs (for SCS and APQ measures). A .05 significance level was allocated in all tests. Second, to test the main hypothesis that increased intensity of conflict corresponds to a worse quality of parenting, the correlations between conflicts measures (SCS and PCC), stress (PSI-SF), and parenting practices (APQ) were calculated using Spearman's rho coefficient.

Gender differences in conflict and parenting practices

A multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) was conducted on SCS measures to assess gender differences in marital conflict style (tab. 1). The MANOVA revealed a more frequent use in women, than in men of both constructive as well destructive conflict tactics. Mothers also reported more conflicts on issues related to parenting, as confirmed by unvaried ANOVA on PPC measures [$F(1, 108) = 8.41, p = .005$]. No gender differences emerged on APQ measures.

Measures	Fathers (n = 59) Means (SD)	Mothers (n = 51) Means (SD)	Comparisons
<i>Marital conflict</i> (SCS)			$F(1, 108) = 50.31,$ $p < .001$
Verbal attack	1.15 (0.98)	2.56 (1.10)	$F(1, 108) = 12.77,$ $p < .01$
Compromise	2.67 (2.05)	3.76 (0.85)	$F(1, 108) = 24.68,$ $p < .001$
Avoid	1.29 (1.18)	2.42 (1.21)	$F(1, 108) = 24.14,$ $p < .001$
Physical anger	0.67 (0.49)	1.04 (0.24)	
<i>Conflict over parenting</i> (PPC)	1.05 (1.36)	2.10 (1.65)	$F(1, 108) = 8.41,$ $p = .005$
<i>Parenting stress</i> (PSI-SF)	69.14 (17.19)	73.59 (22.80)	n.s.
<i>Parenting practices</i> (APQ)			
Involvement	38.92 (6.34)	40.41 (4.72)	n.s.
Positive parenting	24.37 (3.23)	25.35 (3.39)	n.s.
Inconsistent discipline	15.99 (3.98)	16.73 (3.75)	n.s.
Corporal punishment	4.75 (1.50)	5.33 (1.80)	n.s.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for conflict and parenting measures separated for parent gender.

Parental stress and conflict

The ANOVA on PSI-SF scores shows no significant gender effect for the stress levels. Correlational analysis, calculated separately for fathers (tab. 2) and mothers (tab. 3), show different significant associations as a function of parent gender. Whereas for men results only a positive correlation between parental distress and increased attacks towards partner ($\rho = .38, p < .05$), for the mothers multiple association emerge: maternal distress positively correlates with open conflicts on childrearing issues ($\rho = .51, p < .01$), verbal attack ($\rho = .65, p < .01$) and violence toward the partner ($\rho = .42, p < .01$).

Measures Fathers	PPC	PSI	Involvement	Positive parenting	Inconsistent discipline	Corporal punishment
Avoid	.31	.30	.35 (**)	.30 (*)	-.32 (*)	.15
Physical anger	.23	-.05	.48 (**)	.39 (**)	-.43 (**)	.09
Compromise	.10	-.10	.49 (**)	.44 (**)	-.44 (**)	-.01
Verbal attack	.23	.38 (*)	.34 (**)	.30 (*)	-.25	.14
Conflict parenting (PPC) over	1.0	.24	-.05	-.01	.01	.21
Parenting stress (PSI)	.24	1.0	-.44 (**)	-.51 (**)	.29	.09

Table 2. Correlations coefficients (Spearman's ρ) between conflict and parenting measures for fathers; (*) Significant at $p < .05$ (**) Significant at $p < .01$

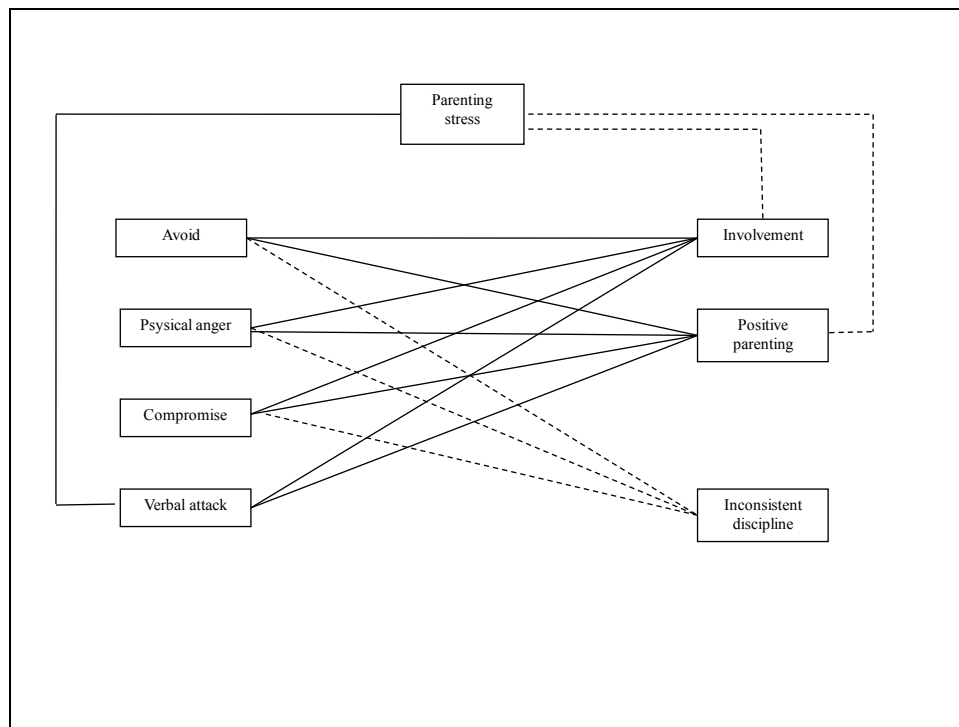


Figure 1. Correlations between conflict and parenting measures for fathers. Continuous lines represent positive relations, dotted lines represent negative relations.

Measures Mothers	PPC	PSI	Involvement	Positive parenting	Inconsistent discipline	Corporal punishment
Avoid	.02	-.11	-.01	-.10	.13	-.11
Physical anger	.17	.42 (*)	-.30 (*)	-.29 (*)	.16	.17
Compromise	-.21	-.11	.21	.27	-.37 (*)	-.03
Verbal attack	.30	.65 (**)	-.38 (**)	-.52 (**)	.48 (**)	.10
Conflict over parenting (PPC)	1.0	.51 (**)	-.15	-.04	.11	.38 (*)
Parenting stress (PSI)	.51 (**)	1.0	-.40 (*)	-.44 (*)	.24	.48 (**)

Table 3. Correlations coefficients (Spearman’s *rho*) between conflict and parenting measures for mothers; (*) Significant at $p < .05$ (**) Significant at $p < .01$

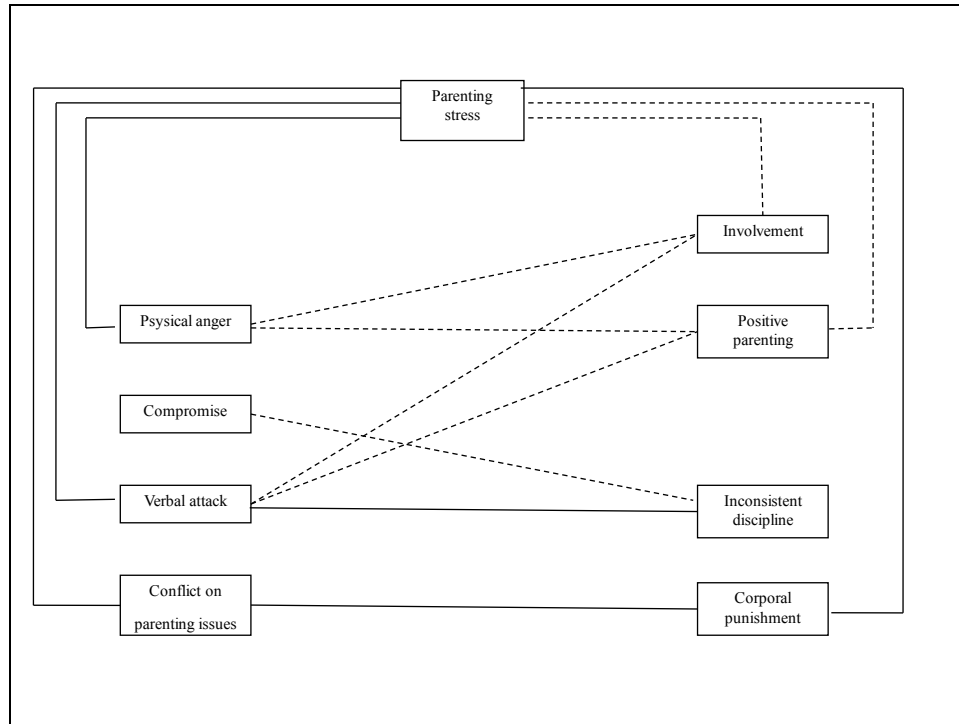


Figure 2. Correlations between conflict and parenting measures for mothers. Continuous lines represent positive relations, dotted lines represent negative relations.

Conflict and parenting practices

Spearman’s correlations among conflict measures (SCS and PPC) and parenting dimensions (APQ), disaggregated for mothers and parents, reveal interesting gender differences. For mothers (figure 2) violence and attack correlate negatively with effective practices (involvement and positive parenting) and positively with incoherence in discipline. Increased disagreement for childrearing corresponds to more frequent corporal punishment. For fathers (figure 1), on the contrary, destructive marital tactics (avoidance and violence) correlate positively with effective practices (increased involvement and positive parenting); avoidance also is related to

better quality of practices (involvement and positive parenting) and increasing in discipline coherence. Constructive compromise correlates only for fathers with increased involvement and positive parenting, whereas for both parents compromise is negatively correlated to inconsistent discipline.

Discussion

The main scope of this research was to evaluate if different parenting practices could be differentially linked to marital conflict, particularly to verify if increased destructive marital conflicts are associated with poor and ineffective parenting. These associations were separately investigated in fathers and mothers, since previous researches showed both gender differences in marital conflict tactics and in spillover-effects, that is, the transfer of hostility and negative emotions from marriage with parent-child relationships. Moreover, the focus of this study was day-to-day conflicts in intact families, unlike most of the data collected with many parents who are experiencing separation and divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991; Yu, Pettit, Lansford, Dodge, & Bates, 2010).

First, data from this research show that compromise is a more common style in women, as frequent is the recourse to avoidance and attack behaviors (both physical and verbal). These results are partially in line with those of previous studies which showed gender differences in conflict tactics. Christensen and Heavey (1990), among others, founded a more direct approach (through verbal attack or aggressive behaviors towards the spouse) in women, but a more frequent use of avoidance in men (detachment and withdrawal during marital discussion).

In addition, mothers of this sample declare a higher frequency for the child-centered conflicts. This result is in accord with data reported by O'Leary and Vidair (2005) who found a greater influence of childrearing conflicts on mothers and significant links between child-related disagreements and ratings of children's internalizing and externalizing problems.

The second hypothesis to test was the existence of a strengthening effect between intra-marital conflicts and parental distress, therefore assuming a mutual influence process in which the tensions in parent-child relations can influence the couple relationships and vice versa. Overall, the results suggest a greater vulnerability to the daily stress in mothers than in fathers. In fact, women who perceive higher levels of stress in parent-child relationships report also more frequent disagreements and open discussions with their spouse about parenting; moreover, their behaviors towards the spouse are characterized by a hostile and violent style. In

fathers, instead, higher levels of parenting stress are associated to more frequent verbal attacks towards the spouse, in the form of expressions that are intended to hurt the other; for men, however, any association does not emerge between parenting stress and disagreements for the children.

The third objective was to explore how marital system impacts parenting practices. According to spillover effects it was assumed a negative contamination between dynamics of conflict between partners and a worse quality of parent-child relationships. In particular, it had been hypothesized that an increase of destructive conflict (aggression and/or avoidance) was associated to less positive practices (warmth and involvement) and plus disciplinary incoherence and physical punishment. This hypothesis was partially confirmed considering that the links between specific types of marital conflict and parenting practices change between fathers and mothers. Gender differences in conflict management emerge above in disruptive tactics, namely, avoidance of confrontation, violence and attack. For *mothers* only increased attacks and violent behaviors in marital relationship are associated to diminished positive parenting (involvement and affectivity); in addition physical attack is associated to an increasing in inconsistent discipline. These data therefore seem to support the existence of spillover effects in mother-child relationships, but not in the paternal parenting. Davies, Harold, Goeke-Morey, and Cummings (2002) argue that not only the exposure to marital conflicts, but these changes in positive parenting, particularly diminished warmth and sensitivity, compromise the emotional well-being of the children who more often have emotional implications (i.e. decreased emotional security, internalizing problems) and behavioral problems (i.e. more aggressiveness and less effective problem-solving strategies).

In mothers the child-rearing disagreements increase the use of corporal punishment, even if this parental practice correlate also with high levels of stress in parent-child relationship. However, the link between these variables remains to be explored, as well as the direction of their influences, because we must not neglect that the stress created by children's problems compromises marital relationships (Stroud, Durbin, Wilson, & Mendelsohn, 2011). In other words, the difficult-to-discipline children could induce more frequent use of reactive behaviors (i.e. corporal punishment or harsh discipline), together with an increase of discussion between the spouse about the effective methods to manage their behavioral problems. Correlational analysis in this study indicate for mothers multiple connections among parental distress, punitive discipline and child-centered

conflicts, whereas for fathers disagreement about childrearing does not enter in the associations with parental distress or corporal punishment.

In short, the existence of spillover effects emerges only for the mothers, whose destructive conflict tactics with partners interfere with warm and effective parenting. For fathers, alternatively, the results support a compensatory hypothesis: according to this model parents fill unmet needs in their marital relationship through the parent–child relationship, thereby creating higher quality parent–child relationships under higher levels of marital distress (e.g., Enger, 1988). Therefore, this competing model proposes that the marital and parent–child subsystems may be dissimilar in quality.

Interestingly, constructive strategies of conflict management (that is compromise) for *both* partners are linked to increased disciplinary coherence. A possible explanation is that couples who are willing to negotiate conflicts, trying to accept the point of view of the partner, are also better able to agree on and maintain discipline behaviors towards children. However, only for *fathers* a marital relationship positively oriented toward compromise is associated to better parenting quality, with increased involvement and affectivity.

These findings are relevant if we consider, in line with the literature, that constructive conflict behaviour has a positive impact on the child's emotional well-being and prosocial behaviour (McCoy, Cummings, & Davies, 2009). If children can observe that parents use calm discussion to resolve their discords, they can learn self-regulation and problem-solving as strategies to manage interpersonal disagreements; moreover, their confidence in the bonds parenting is strengthened. Constructive tactics are also linked to warm and coherent parenting style which, in turn, is predictive of positive child adjustment (Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006).

In conclusion, these differences in marital tactics are relevant to took in consideration because they can mediate the positive and negative consequences of marital conflicts on children's adjustment. McCoy, George, Cummings, and Davies (2013), among others, have recently investigated the differential impact of marital conflict and mothers' and fathers' parenting on children's well-being. Their results confirm that constructive conflict is related to both mothers' and fathers' warm parenting, whereas destructive marital conflict was linked to inconsistent discipline in fathers. These practices, in turn, were related to children's school and social adjustment. A limitation in our study, however, is to have not assessed the impact of the

conflicts on the adaptation of the children, an aspect that authors intend to explore in future researches.

Another limitation of the study derives from data obtained exclusively by self-report measures, particularly for conflict variables (tactics and frequency of child-related discords) reported by couples themselves. Future research should employ alternative method for collecting data, like diary records about family events (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Kouros, Papp, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2014). In this method data were obtained after particular incidents of interparental conflict that parents recently experienced, so reducing memory errors or bias in reporting family interactions and/or everyday conflicts. Moreover, this method requires that parents were extensively trained in the use of the diary procedure before completing home records (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2004). Another reliable procedure could be measure children's perception of parental conflicts, a method useful to gain a more complete understanding of the association between marital disagreements and child's adjustment: children reporting more frequent, intense, and unresolved conflicts between their parents evidenced higher levels of both internalizing and externalizing problems (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992).

Relevant clinical implications derive from these findings, first of all the negative consequences of child-related and disruptive conflicts between parents on the development of emotional and behavioral difficulties in children. As some review and meta-analysis show, children are at risk for a range of clinic-referred or health problems that include conduct disorders, low academic performance, depression, anxiety, fatigue, and sleeping problems (Snyder, 1998; Troxel & Matthews, 2004), with important implications for interventions for couples with children. Moreover older children appear to be more vulnerable to the impact of conflict between parents than younger children (Rhoades, 2008), not only because they have been exposed to it for a longer period of time compared to younger children, but also because individual factors as children's gender, cognitions and behaviors and coping strategies play a significant and complex role in the relationship between marital conflict and child adjustment (Zimet & Jacob, 2001).

From a preventive perspective, it may also be useful to support children who are exposed to conflict between parents, particularly for children whose parents are separated or divorced. These children may benefit from the help to explore what parental conflict means for them and the ways to cope with it, even if there are few researches documenting the effectiveness of these

interventions for children (Grych, 2005). Findings coming from programs to educate parents about the ways to handle better conflicts are more promising. Faircloth and Cummings (2008) evaluated a prevention program whose objectives were to understand the negative consequences of marital conflict exposure on children, to learn the distinction between destructive and constructive behaviors, and to decrease marital hostility in front of the children. After the training couples reported decreasing hostility and child-related open conflict, with an improvement in constructive tactics and parenting practices. These interventions are promising for preventive work with couples in which daily conflicts and poor parenting practices work as precursors to emotional and behavioral problems in children's development.

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