# Patterns of Interparental Conflict in Relation to Parenting and Children's Emotional Insecurity: A Person-Centered Approach

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## Abstract

We conducted secondary analysis using data from the Building Strong Families project. The sample consisted of low-income unmarried couples that were expectant/new parents. We examined (1) patterns of couples' conflict behaviors at intra-individual and within couple levels, and (2) conflict behaviors relate to mothers' and fathers' parenting and children's emotional insecurity. Latent Class Analysis suggested four distinct profiles of couples. Results showed that (1) within-couple conflict behaviors are more stable than individual behaviors, and (2) the patterns of conflict behaviors within couple are differentially linked to child development. Implications: regard for family unit when working with families.

## Background and Current Study

- **Constructive conflict** (functional) has predicted high parental sensitivity and school-aged children's high emotional security (McCoy et al., 2009). Concurrent associations between constructive conflict and children's emotional (in)security in toddlerhood have not been supported (Brock & Kochanska, 2016).
- **Destructive conflict** (hostility) is associated with less sensitive and more harsh parenting behaviors (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000) and children's emotional insecurity across a wide range of ages (Brock & Kochanska, 2016; Cummings et al., 2002)

### General findings on conflict behaviors:

- Stability of conflict if parental status excluded from the analyses (Birditt et al., 2010; Noller et al., 1994)
- Transition to parenthood – decrease in constructive; increase in destructive conflict behaviors (Doss et al., 2009)

### Theoretical Background

- **Spillover Hypothesis** - transfer of mood and behaviors from one relationship to another (Engfer, 1988)
- **Emotional Security Hypothesis** - the quality of interparental interactions influences the extent to which children feel security in their relationships with parents (Cummings & Davies, 2002)

### Current Study

- Person-centered approach
- Examination of individual and within-couple conflict behaviors
- Focus on both mothers' and fathers' parenting
- Concurrent and longitudinal associations of interparental conflict across early childhood

## Methods

### Demographics of Participants

- $N$ = 2,172 couples
- Mothers/Fathers: 31%/26% Caucasian, 63%/68% African American, 24% Hispanic
- 1/3 of the sample had less than a high school degree
- W0 = baseline; W1 = W0 + 15 mos, W2 = W0 + 36 mos
- 69% of couples lived together at W0

### W1 & W2 Constructive Conflict

- 8 items: "even when arguing, we keep a sense of humor"
- $1$ = often happen to $4$ = never happen
- Mothers, $a$s = .88/.90; Fathers, $a$s = .84/.87

### W1 & W2 Destructive Conflict

- 9 items: "partner puts down my opinions or feelings"
- $1$ = often happen to $4$ = never happen
- Mothers, $a$s = .85/.89; Fathers, $a$s = .88/.87

### W2 Parenting Behaviors

- Three-Bags task; $1$ = very low to $7$ = very high
- Mothers: supportive ($a$ = .84), harsh ($a$ = .86)
- Fathers: supportive ($a$ = .68), harsh ($a$ = .70)

### W2 Child Emotional Insecurity

- 10 items: "child appears angry"
- $1$ = often to $4$ = never or not applicable
- Mothers, $a$ = .85; Fathers, $a$ = .87

## Results

- Latent Profile Analysis in M*plus*
- Missing data were handled using FIML
- Control variables: parents' depressive symptoms, parenting alliance, financial difficulties, and infidelity
- Couples profile trends: (1) conflict behaviors similar and stable across waves, and (2) conflict behaviors inconsistent and different at the couple and individual level
- Profile 1 = high constructive low destructive
  - Among the oldest couples, highest coparenting alliance, likely to stay together, least likely to report financial difficulties and infidelity
- Profile 2 = high constructive moderate destructive
  - High on conflict
- Profile 3 = discordant high destructive
  - Highest on maternal depression
- Profile 4 = decrease constructive increase destructive
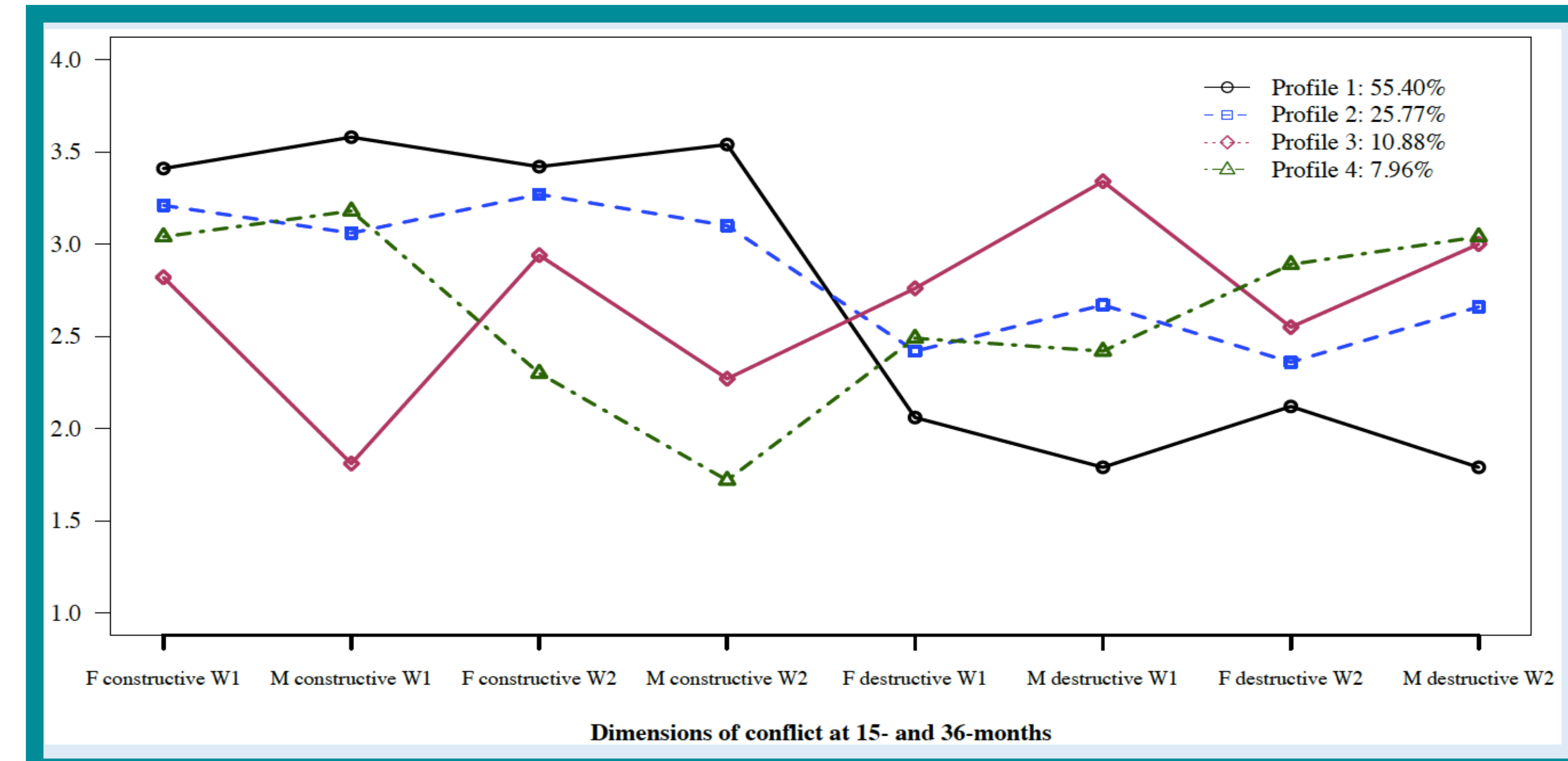  - Most likely to separate



Dimensions of conflict at 15- and 36-months

Table 1. Parenting and child outcomes at 36-months by profile membership

| Variables | Profile 1 | Profile 2 | Profile 3 | Profile 4 | Diff |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M/SE | M/SE | M/SE | M/SE | Chi-sq. |
| **F supportive** | 4.80/.04 | 4.66/.05 | 4.75/.07 | 4.88/.08 | none |
| **F harshness** | 2.51/.04 | 2.67/.05 | 2.70/.08 | 2.51/.09 | P3, P2>P1 |
| **M supportive** | 4.62/.03 | 4.48/.04 | 4.56/.06 | 4.54/.07 | P1>P2 |
| **M harshness** | 2.63/.03 | 2.88/.04 | 2.84/.07 | 2.79/.08 | P3, P2>P1 |
| **C em insec** | 1.30/.04 | 1.54/.06 | 1.38/.06 | 1.49/.08 | P2>P1 |

*Note*. F = father, M = mother, C = child, em = emotional, insec = insecurity; Significance of differences is based on bonferroni correction of *p* < .007; Program site, intervention status, and child sex were included as controls.

## Conclusions and Implications

- Support for the **spillover hypothesis**:
  - mothers who exhibited least destructive conflict were most supportive
  - couples with high levels of destructive conflict exhibited harsh parenting behaviors
- Support for the **emotional security hypothesis**:
  - children exposed to low levels of destructive conflict showed lowest levels of emotional insecurity
- The majority of couples in this high-risk sample used constructive conflict behaviors to manage conflict
- Individuals in relationship are likely to be more similar than different
- Individual conflict behaviors are subject to slight changes
- Within-couple behaviors are most stable than individual
- Implications for counseling, therapy, and interventions