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Constructive and Destructive Conflict, Parenting, and Coparenting Alliance

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Abstract

We conducted secondary analysis using data from the Building Strong Families project. At baseline, the sample consisted of low-income unmarried couples that were expectant/new parents. Guided by the *spillover hypothesis*, we examined the link between destructive and constructive conflict and parenting (i.e., supportiveness and harshness) and coparenting alliance for mothers and fathers when children were 36-months old. We found that (1) destructive conflict was related to decreased coparenting alliance and (2) constructive conflict was related to increased coparenting alliance, for mothers and fathers. Contrary to past research, neither destructive nor constructive conflict related to parenting behaviors.

Literature Review

- **Destructive conflict** (hostility, verbal/physical aggression)
  - *In relation to parenting*: associated with less sensitive and more harsh parenting (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000)
  - *In relation to coparenting*: parents may undermine each other and disagree on child raising practices (Strurge-Apple et al., 2006)
- **Constructive conflict** (respect, affection)
  - *In relation to parenting*: predicted high parental sensitivity (McCoy et al., 2013)
  - *In relation to coparenting*: no published research

Theoretical Background

- **Family Systems Theory —** family members are interrelated and changes in one relationship potentially affect changes in the other (Cox & Paley, 2003)
  - *Spillover Hypothesis —* transfer of mood and behaviors from one relationship to another (Engfer, 1988)

Current Study

- *Hypothesis 1*: destructive conflict is positively related to parental harshness and negatively associated with parental supportiveness and coparenting alliance, for mothers and fathers
- *Hypothesis 2*: constructive conflict is negatively related to parental harshness and positively associated with parental supportiveness and coparenting alliance, for mothers and fathers

Methods

Demographics of Participants
- N = 5,105
- Mothers/Fathers: 31%/26% European American, 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
- 44% of couples lived together at W2

W2 Constructive Conflict
- 8 items: "even when arguing, we keep a sense of humor"
- 1 = *often happen* to 4 = *never happen*
- Mothers, as = .90; Fathers, as = .87

W2 Destructive Conflict
- 9 items: "partner puts down my opinions or feelings"
- 1 = *often happen* to 4 = *never happen*
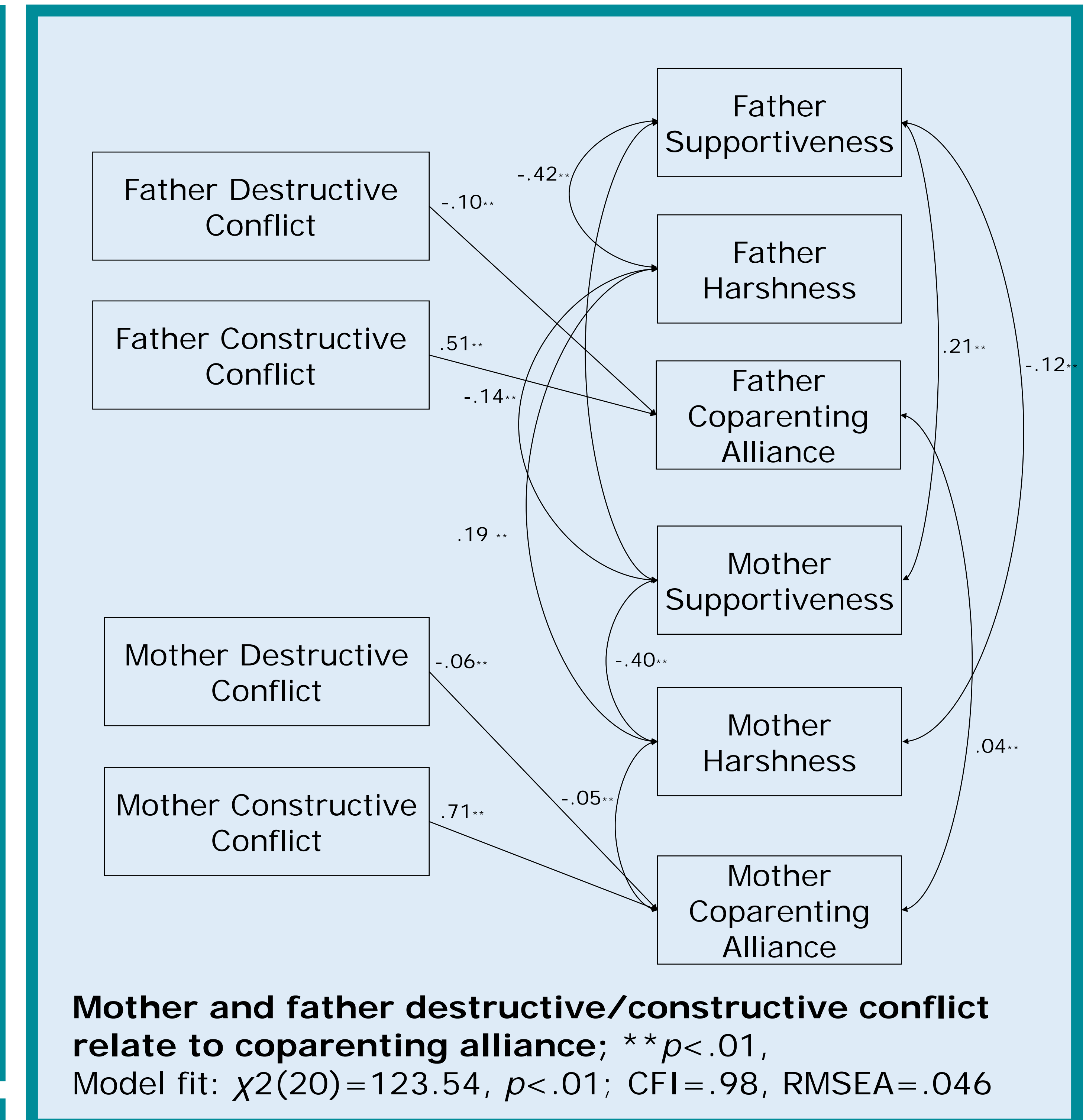- Mothers, as = .89; Fathers, as = .87

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 Coparenting alliance (Abidin & Brunner, 1995)
- 10 items: "my child's other parent and I are a good team"
- 1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = strongly disagree
- Mothers, a = .95; Fathers, a = .94

Results

- We used M*plus* v. 7.3
- Missing data were handled using FIML
- Control variables: program site, intervention status, race, and self-reported depressive symptoms
- The model fit the data well
- Destructive conflict was significantly negatively correlated with constructive conflict for mothers and fathers
- Conflict behaviors were significantly positively correlated between mothers and fathers
- High scores on destructive conflict for mothers (b=-.06, p<.01) and fathers (b=-.10, p<.01) related to low on co-parenting alliance
- High scores on constructive conflict for mothers (b=.71, p<.01) and fathers (b=.51, p<.01) related to high levels of co-parenting alliance

**Mother and father destructive/constructive conflict relate to coparenting alliance; **p<.01,
Model fit: $\chi2(20)$=123.54, p<.01; CFI=.98, RMSEA=.046

Conclusions and Implications

- Support for the **spillover hypothesis** for coparenting
- Contrary to past research findings, we did not find support for the spillover from conflict to parenting behaviors

- Possible reasons:
  - The majority of past research did not differentiate between mothers' and fathers' conflict behaviors (Kopystynska et al., 2017)
  - Most findings on these relations are based on predominantly Caucasian middle-class married families (e.g., McCoy et al., 2013; Sturge-Apple et al., 2006)
  - Understanding how these processes differ across diverse samples is of importance for prevention work

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