Constructive and Destructive Interparental Conflict, Parenting, and Coparenting Alliance

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Abstract

Guided by the spillover hypothesis of family systems theory, we used data from the Building Strong Families (BSF) project to examine intra-family relations between destructive and constructive interparental conflict, harsh and supportive parenting behaviors, and coparenting alliance across different family configurations: married, cohabiting, and non-cohabiting (never married) parents. Our sample ($N = 2,784$ couples/parents) was racially diverse, low-income couples who were unmarried at the conception of their child. All variables were measured when children were approximately 36-months of age. Interparental conflict was assessed through an instrument that included both parents' reported conflict in the relationship and the perception of the other parent's conflict behaviors. Parenting behaviors were measured through observational data and coparenting alliance was based on mothers' and fathers' reports. As expected, path analyses revealed that destructive interparental conflict was related to lower levels of coparenting alliance, whereas constructive interparental conflict was related to higher levels of coparenting alliance, for mothers and fathers. For fathers only, destructive interparental conflict related to harsh parenting, suggesting that paternal parenting is vulnerable to the quality of the relationship with the mother. None of the proposed associations differed by family structure. These findings suggest the need for intervention programs to focus on promoting adaptive conflict management behaviors rather than on family structure.

Keywords: constructive conflict, destructive conflict, interparental conflict, parenting, coparenting

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Conflict is inevitable in close relationships and interparental conflict in particular lays a foundation for the family climate with important implications for the well-being of family members (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Although traditionally conflict has been viewed as a unidimensional construct that predicts family dysfunction, scholars have been focused on the importance of differentiating between conflict management behaviors. Whereas *constructive conflict* reflects respectful behaviors and regulated responses (e.g., less emotionally charged discussions for reasons of disagreement, affection), *destructive conflict* is managed in ways that cultivates hostility in the relationship (Bergman, Cummings, & Warmuth, 2016; Cummings & Davies, 2010). Most research on family processes is centered on the implications of destructive interparental conflict, and more studies are needed to explore the role of constructive conflict (e.g., McCoy, George, Cummings, & Davies, 2013). Further, because the majority of work on the implications of these conflict management strategies has relied on middle-class married couples with children, and because attention has been raised about the need to replicate social science research across different groups of individuals (Pashler & Wagenmakers, 2012), understanding these processes in other family configurations that continue to grow considerably in the United States and other Western cultures merits attention.

We addressed these research gaps, and this need for replication in the social sciences, by focusing on the role of interparental destructive and constructive conflict in relation to mothers' and fathers' parenting and coparenting behaviors. We were guided by family systems theory, in which the family is viewed as an organized complex system of multiple relationships and processes that are interdependent (Cox & Paley, 2003). Specific predictions were formulated using the spillover hypothesis that stems from this theoretical framework and which suggests that

behaviors expressed in one relationship are likely to similarly affect other areas of family processes or functioning, such as parenting and coparenting (Cox & Paley, 2003; Engfer, 1988). Moreover, to extend knowledge on interparental conflict beyond middle-class married couples, we examined these relations in a sample of racially diverse, low-income families, across different family configurations: married, cohabiting, and non-cohabiting parents.

Interparental Conflict and Parenting

Research on the implications of destructive interparental conflict tactics on family processes, such as parenting, is abundant. In a meta-analysis of 39 studies, Krishnakumar and Buehler (2000) concluded that interparental conflict that can be described as destructive facilitates negative parenting behaviors across various stages of development. Individual studies since then have also reported that destructive interparental conflict is related to compromised parenting in early childhood, such as harsh discipline (Erath & Bierman, 2006; Rhoades, Leve, Harold, Neiderhiser, Shaw, & Reiss, 2011) and lower levels of parental warmth and sensitivity (Sturge-Apple, Davies, Cicchetti, & Fittoria, 2014; Zhou, Cao, & Leerkes, 2017). These findings provide support for the spillover hypothesis, suggesting that parents who experience corrosive conflict and hostility in their own relationship may have less energy available to respond to children's needs in a supportive fashion (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Grych & Fincham, 2001).

Research on constructive interparental conflict and parenting is less common, but there is some evidence to support this association. For example, in families with children in middle childhood, constructive interparental conflict has shown to be positively related to maternal and paternal warmth (McCoy et al., 2013), but unrelated to negative parenting behaviors (Coln, Jordan, & Mercer, 2013; McCoy et al., 2013). Additionally, Kopystynska and colleagues (2017) found that when the interparental relationship was defined by high levels of constructive conflict

management behaviors (i.e., both mothers and fathers used constructive strategies), mothers behaved less harshly with their toddlers. Although the associations between constructive interparental conflict and parenting behaviors seem to be more nuanced than the associations between destructive interparental conflict and parenting behaviors, theoretically, positive emotions expressed in the interparental relationship should foster nurturing and responsive parenting, following from the spillover hypothesis (Engfer, 1988; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). Given the lack of clarity in the spillover processes between constructive interparental conflict and parenting, more research is needed to affirm these theoretical assertions.

Interparental Conflict and Coparenting Alliance

Interparental conflict may have associations with the coparental relationship, or coparenting alliance, the concept that reflects the extent to which parents work together as a team supporting each other in their respective parental role in the best interest of the child (Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001). Indeed, interparental conflict as well as the quality of the interparental relationship have shown to contribute uniquely to coparental cooperation in families with toddlers (Cabrera, Shannon, & La Taillade, 2009; Peltz, Rogge, & Sturge-Apple, 2018), including engagement in parental responsibilities for fathers who do not live with the mother of the child (Fagan, Levine, Kaufman, & Hammar, 2016). With respect to specific conflict strategies, parents in distressed relationships with high levels of maladaptive conflict often undermine each other in their parental responsibilities and disagree on child raising practices (McHale, 1995; Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006). Consistent with the spillover hypothesis, the findings of past studies suggest that the hostility that parents experience in their relationship diminishes their ability to cooperate and support each other in their roles as parents. Although there is no published research on the role of constructive interparental conflict and

coparenting behaviors, theoretically, constructive conflict should be positively related to parents' cooperation. One of the major contributions of our study is to test this possibility.

Proposed Study

With a few exceptions (Fagan et al., 2016; Kopystynska et al., 2017), much of the current knowledge on proposed associations that are discussed above is based mostly on middle-class two-parent married families. While these efforts are a contribution to the literature, the impact of specific conflict management strategies on family processes may differ for families in low-income households as these families may experience stressors that interfere with the possibility of not being able to meet the needs of basic daily living, such as economic hardship and unemployment (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010). Partially because of these stressors, low-income families are likely to experience greater levels of relationship instability (Conger et al., 2010). Further, given that unmarried parents (either single parents or cohabiting) often experience greater lack of financial resources, family processes may differ based on family structure, but such comparisons are few in number (Conger et al., 2010). Our study contributes to the literature by examining family processes using a sample of racially diverse, low-income parents and testing these associations across different family structures.

Taken together, the goal of the present study was to simultaneously examine the direct links from mother and father destructive and constructive interparental conflict to their parenting (i.e., harsh and supportive parenting) and coparenting behaviors across different family structures: married, cohabiting, and non-cohabiting parents. Congruent with the spillover hypothesis, we hypothesized that destructive interparental conflict is related to greater levels of harsh parenting (H1) and lower levels of supportive parenting (H2) and coparenting alliance (H3) for mothers and fathers. Further, we hypothesized that constructive interparental conflict is

related to lower levels of harsh parenting (H4) and greater levels of supportive parenting (H5) and coparenting alliance (H6) for mothers and fathers.

We also aimed to examine potential differences in these processes by family structures. Limited empirical evidence in this area is inconclusive, either noting no differences (Carlson & McLanahan, 2006) or differences in some aspects of parenting but not others (Gibson-Davis, 2008; Guzzo & Lee, 2008). Variations, however, may not necessarily be attributable to marital status per se, but rather to characteristics of persons who choose marriage (e.g., higher income, greater levels of education, more relationship stability) versus those who adhere to less formal arrangements (see Gibson-Davis, 2008 and Guzzo & Lee, 2008). Complementary to exploring differences in family processes by family structure, we took advantage of available data to determine if marital status matters with respect to mean-level differences on key variables of the study: mothers' and fathers' constructive and destructive interparental conflict, supportive and harsh parenting behaviors, and coparenting alliance.

Methods

Under the approval of the institutional board review, we used data from the Building Strong Families (BSF) project, which was facilitated by Mathematic Policy Research Inc. The goal of BSF was to provide relationship-strengthening education and services to low-income unmarried couples who were either expecting or had their first biological child under the age of three months. Couples were recruited from hospitals and clinics from eight cities across the United States between July 2005 through March 2008. Eligible couples were at least 18 years of age, romantically involved, and were unmarried at conception of their baby. Although income eligibility was not an exclusion criterion, BSF targeted low-income populations. Couples were

screened at enrollment for a history of intimate partner violence, which disqualified them from participation in the study. Couples were randomly assigned to the intervention or control group. There were no effects of the intervention on reports of conflict behaviors and coparenting alliance (Wood, Moore, Clarkwest, & Killewald, 2014).

Procedures

BSF consisted of three waves of data (Dion et al., 2008; Hershey, Devaney, Wood, & McConnell, 2008). At baseline (W0), demographic information was collected, such as parents' age, ethnicity, level of education, marital status, living arrangements, and annual income (see Table 1). Follow-up surveys were collected at W1 (15 months after random assignment) and when BSF child was approximately 36 months old (W2; post-program), which included in-home direct observations. Of the eight sites, three sites did not include observational data of mothers' and fathers' parenting behaviors, and therefore, were excluded from the current analyses. Our main analyses were based on the data collected at W2 ($N = 2,784$ couples). The present study included assessment of destructive and constructive interparental conflict, parenting, and coparenting alliance. Participants were paid \$25 separately after assessment at each wave.

Covariates

Control variables included child sex, parental race, and both parents' age and level of education (all collected at W0), as these variables have shown to predict differences in parenting (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). We also controlled for parental depressive symptoms (W2) because in numerous studies, adult depression has shown to be associated with destructive interparental conflict (Du Rocher Schudlich et al., 2015; Shelton & Harold, 2008). Finally, financial difficulties (W2) were controlled for because families of low socioeconomic status

often experience greater levels of conflict and relationship problems than economically advantaged families (Conger et al., 2010).

Measures

Destructive interparental conflict (W2). Mothers and fathers were read statements from a 9-item measure to report on their perception of the other parent's destructive conflict behaviors and how often they as parents engage in destructive conflict behaviors (e.g., "When we argue, I feel personally attacked by my partner" and "Little arguments turn into ugly fights with accusation/criticism"; Hershey et al., 2008). Responses were rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = *often happen* to 4 = *never happen*) and reverse-coded for higher scores to reflect greater use of destructive conflict behaviors. Scores for mothers/fathers ($\alpha = .90/.87$) were averaged to create a composite for each parent's destructive conflict.

Constructive interparental conflict (W2). Mothers and fathers reported on their perception of the other parent's constructive conflict behaviors and how often they as parents engage in constructive conflict behaviors using an 8-item measure (e.g., "I feel respected even when we disagree" and "During arguments, we are good at taking breaks when we need them"; Hershey et al., 2008). Responses were rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = *often happen* to 4 = *never happen*) and reverse-coded for higher scores to reflect greater use of constructive conflict behaviors. Scores for mothers/fathers ($\alpha = .90/.87$) were averaged to create a composite for each parent's constructive conflict.

Parenting behaviors (i.e., supportive parenting, harsh parenting; W2). Mothers' and fathers' parenting behaviors were videotaped separately during a 10-minute semi-structured parent-child interaction activity known as the Two-Bags Task, a modified version of the Three-Bags Task (NICHD ECCRN, 1999). For this activity, a mat was placed on the floor. The

interviewer asked the parent to open bag #1 (book) and bag #2 (pretend play toys) in sequence and divide the time between two bags as they wished. Eighteen trained staff coded interactions in a centralized location achieving 90% inter-rater reliability, which was calculated as agreement within one-point on each scale. Ten percent of cases were double-coded. Based on six parental behavioral scales that were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *very low* to 7 = *very high*), two composite parenting behaviors were measured. *Supportive* parenting behaviors ($\alpha = .80/.78$) included a composite of four scales: sensitivity (positive, responsive child-centered behaviors), positive regard (expression of praise, admiration), cognitive stimulation (teaching), and detachment (reverse-coded to represent the degree of parental involvement in the activity with a child), which were significantly positively correlated for mothers and fathers, $rs(1,728) = .38$ to $.65, p < .01$ and $rs(1,231) = .41$ to $.61, p < .01$. *Harsh* parenting behaviors ($\alpha = .71/.69$) included a composite of two scales: negative regard (anger and dissatisfaction with a child) and intrusiveness (parent-centered, forceful control), which were significantly positively correlated for mothers and fathers, $r(1,728) = .55, p < .01$ and $r(1,231) = .53, p < .01$.

Coparenting alliance (W2). Mothers and fathers assessed the perceived level of alliance on coparenting issues and shared parenting philosophy using a 10-item subset drawn from the Parenting Alliance Inventory (PAI; Abidin & Brunner, 1995). Each parent responded to the items (e.g., “My child’s other parent and I are a good team” and “My child’s other parent and I communicate well”) on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*) and reverse-coded for higher scores to indicate greater levels of perceived parental agreement. Mothers’ and fathers’ scores ($\alpha = .97/.95$) on coparenting alliance were separately averaged to create a composite for each parent’s coparenting alliance.

Depressive symptoms (W2). Both parents reported on their depressive symptoms using a short version of the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale that consists of 12 items (Ross, Mirowsky, & Huber, 1983). Participants recalled the frequency of depressive symptoms (e.g., “I felt sad” and “Everything I did felt like an effort”) in the past week. Items were rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = *rarely or none of the time* to 4 = *most or all of the time*). Mothers’ and fathers’ scores ($\alpha = .88/.87$) were summed separately to create a composite of each parent’s depressive symptoms.

Financial difficulties (W2). Mothers and fathers reported on their financial hardship using a 3-item binary measure (0 = *no* and 1 = *yes*) indicating whether in the past 12 months they had difficulty paying their bills (e.g., “You were evicted from your home or apartment because you could not pay the rent or mortgage” and “You had service turned off by the water, gas or electric company, or the oil company would not deliver oil because you could not afford to pay the bill”). Mothers’ and fathers’ scores were summed separately to create a composite for each parent’s financial difficulties.

Family structure (W2). Family structure was determined by using the answers provided for two variables: marital status (1 = married, 2 = divorced, 3 = separated, 4 = never been married to each other, 6 = widowed) and whether parents currently lived together (1 = all of the time, 2 = most of the time, 3 = some of the time, 4 = none of the time). Both variables were recoded into binary variables: for the marital status variable, married individuals were assigned a value of 1 and the others were assigned a value of 0. For the living arrangements variable, parents who answered either *all of the time* or *most of the time* or *some of the time* were regarded as living together (assigned a value of 1) and those who answered *none of the time* were regarded as not living together (assigned a value of 0). Because more data were missing for fathers,

analyses were based on answers provided by mothers. Family structure reflected three types of couples: *married* ($N = 636$) included parents who were married and living together; *cohabiting* ($N = 1,020$) included parents who were not married and living together; and *non-cohabiting* ($N = 1,128$) included parents who were not living together and were not married, of which 48 couples were romantically involved on a steady basis, suggesting that the vast majority of non-cohabiting parents were not involved in a romantic relationship with each other when their child was approximately 36 months of age.

Attrition and Missing Data

We examined sample attrition from W1 to W2 based on financial difficulties and depressive symptoms. Mothers with lower levels of depressive symptoms were more likely to participate in the study at W2. Next, missing data patterns at W2 on the main variables of the study were evaluated using Little's MCAR test. A non-significant value ($p > .05$) suggested that data on constructive and destructive interparental conflict were missing completely at random. Little's MCAR test further suggested systematic missingness on parenting behaviors and coparenting alliance. The patterns of missingness were evaluated using a t -test revealing that data were missing by site, parental reporter (more mothers than fathers), and race. We controlled for these variables in our study. Missing data were handled using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) estimation in *Mplus* 8.1 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017), which uses all available information to estimate unbiased parameters and standard errors (Graham, 2009). To further reduce bias, the AUXILIARY command on variables that are stable across occasions and those that typically do not contain missing values was implemented (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2008). In the current study, these variables were parental reporter and site.

Results

Preliminary analyses. Zero-order correlations and descriptive statistics of study variables are in Table 2. All significant correlations were in the expected direction. Constructive conflict was significantly negatively related to destructive conflict, depressive symptoms, and financial difficulties, and positively associated with coparenting alliance for both mothers and fathers. Destructive conflict was negatively related to mothers' and fathers' coparenting alliance, and positively related to mothers' and fathers' depressive symptoms and financial difficulties. For fathers only, destructive conflict was positively associated with harsh parenting. Supportive parenting was negatively associated with both parents' harsh parenting. Fathers' supportive parenting was positively related to fathers' reported coparenting alliance and mothers' supportive parenting was negatively related to mothers' depressive symptoms. Harsh parenting was negatively related to mothers' coparenting alliance and positively related to mothers' and fathers' depressive symptoms. Coparenting was negatively related to each parent's depressive symptoms and mother-reported financial difficulties. Fathers' reports of depressive symptoms related positively to financial difficulties. Mothers' and fathers' scores on the same variables were significantly positively correlated.

Exploratory analyses. We examined mean differences in key study variables by family structure using one-way ANOVA with Bonferroni procedure (see Table 3 and Table 4). Across groups, married mothers showed greater levels of constructive and lower levels of destructive conflict, followed by cohabiting, and then non-cohabiting mothers. In comparison to non-cohabiting fathers, married and cohabiting fathers reported higher levels of constructive and lower levels of destructive conflict behaviors. In terms of parenting, married mothers were more likely than cohabiting and non-cohabiting mothers to be more supportive and less harsh in their parenting behaviors. Married fathers were more likely to be supportive and less harsh in their

parenting than cohabiting fathers. Finally, non-cohabiting mothers and fathers reported lower levels of coparenting alliance than married and cohabiting parents.

Primary analyses. To examine the hypotheses, path analysis (see Figure 1) was tested using *Mplus* 8.1 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017). Following the guidelines of Byrne (2013), multi-group model analyses were conducted in several steps. Model fit was examined through the comparative fit index (CFI), the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR). A model fit is considered to be good (or acceptable) when CFI is greater than or equal to .95 (.90), and both RMSEA and SRMR are less than or equal to .05 (.08) (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

First, a baseline model with no constraints was specified testing paths among the total sample that combined all three family structure groups. Fit indices suggested that the model had a good fit, $\chi^2(54) = 144.18, p < .01$; RMSEA = .03 (90% CI = [.03, .04]); CFI = .97; SRMR = .02. Destructive conflict was negatively associated with coparenting alliance for mothers ($\beta = -.05, p = .03$) and fathers ($\beta = -.09, p < .01$) and constructive conflict was positively related to coparenting alliance for mothers ($\beta = .66, p < .01$) and fathers ($\beta = .58, p < .01$). Destructive conflict was positively related to fathers' harsh parenting ($\beta = .08, p = .04$).

Second, because our model consisted of multiple groups (i.e., married, cohabiting, and non-cohabiting couples), in this step, each model was examined separately. Each model fit the data well: married, $\chi^2(54) = 54.68, p = .45$; RMSEA = .01 (90% CI = [.00, .03]); CFI = .999; SRMR = .03; cohabiting, $\chi^2(54) = 107.96, p < .01$; RMSEA = .04 (90% CI = [.03, .05]); CFI = .95; SRMR = .03; and non-cohabiting, $\chi^2(54) = 82.77, p < .01$; RMSEA = .04 (90% CI = [.02, .05]); CFI = .96; SRMR = .04.

Third, a model was run in which all paths were constrained to be invariant between groups. The model provided adequate fit to the data, $\chi^2(162) = 245.41, p < .01$; RMSEA = .03 (90% CI = [.02, .04]); CFI = .96; SRMR = .03. Next, to determine whether to proceed with examination of each model individually or to examine the entire sample as a whole, model estimates from this step were compared to those of the first step. The chi-square difference test was revealed to be non-significant ($p = .66$), suggesting that it is not necessary to do a multi-group analysis by family structure. In other words, in exploring our research question, we found that the spillover of constructive and destructive interparental conflict on parenting and coparenting alliance is consistent across different family structures.

Given that the paths between conflict behaviors and outcome variables did not vary by family structure, marital status and whether parents live together (both are based on mothers' reports) were added to the baseline model. We included a numeric dyad identification variable to account for interdependence of the data. The model provided a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(54) = 92.36, p < .01$; RMSEA = .02 (90% CI = [.01, .03]); CFI = .99; SRMR = .02. Results showed that destructive conflict was negatively associated with coparenting alliance (H3) for mothers ($\beta = -.06, p < .01$) and fathers ($\beta = -.09, p < .01$), and constructive conflict was positively related to coparenting alliance (H6) for mothers ($\beta = .55, p < .01$) and fathers ($\beta = .51, p < .01$). Destructive conflict was positively associated with paternal harsh parenting ($\beta = .08, p = .04$), providing support for H1, but only for fathers. We did not find support for H2, H4, and H5.

Regarding control variables, higher levels of education was related to more supportive parenting for mothers ($\beta = .12, p < .01$) and fathers ($\beta = .11, p < .01$) and to lower levels of coparenting alliance, but only for mothers ($\beta = -.04, p = .01$). Also, married mothers ($\beta = .08, p < .01$) and fathers ($\beta = .08, p < .01$) exhibited higher levels of supportive. Unmarried residential

fathers were more likely to be less supportive ($\beta = -.11, p < .01$) and more harsh ($\beta = .08, p = .03$). Fathers with depressive symptoms reported greater levels of harsh parenting ($\beta = .06, p = .04$) and lower levels of coparenting alliance ($\beta = -.06, p < .01$). Married mothers ($\beta = -.06, p = .04$) married fathers ($\beta = -.08, p = .02$) were less harsh in their parenting behaviors. Mothers ($\beta = .25, p < .01$) and fathers ($\beta = .21, p < .01$) who were living together experienced greater levels of coparental relationship. Parental race was an inconsistent predictor of some variables. White fathers were likely exhibit supportive parenting ($\beta = .11, p < .01$) and coparenting alliance ($\beta = .06, p = .02$). Hispanic fathers were less likely to be harsh with their children in their parenting ($\beta = -.12, p < .01$) and Black fathers ($\beta = .17, p < .01$) and Black mothers ($\beta = .05, p = .04$) reported greater levels of coparenting alliance. Black mothers were likely to exhibit harsh parenting behaviors ($\beta = .20, p < .01$).

Discussion

The primary goal of this study was to examine whether mothers' and fathers' constructive and destructive conflict behaviors relate to their own supportive and harsh parenting and coparenting alliance across different family structures in early childhood when children were approximately 36 months-old. We tested these relations using a sample of racially diverse, low-income couples who were unmarried at the time of their child's conception. Current findings contribute to an understudied area of research on family processes of racially diverse, economically disadvantaged couples who may be considered at increased risk for transition to parenthood difficulties. Moreover, to our knowledge, this study was the first to examine the relations between constructive interparental conflict and parents' ability to work together as a team in their parenting roles (i.e., co-parenting alliance), which is a notable addition to the field.

We examined whether the proposed relations among interparental conflict and parenting and coparenting varied by family structure. The three family structures measured were parents who were married and living together (i.e., married), parents who were not married and living together (i.e., cohabiting), and parents who were not married and not living together (i.e., non-cohabiting). We posited that constructive and destructive interparental conflict would be related to parenting and coparenting alliance in expected ways similarly across family structures. In line with Carlson and McLanahan (2006), who examined a different set of family processes, we found that regardless of the family structure, mothers' and fathers' conflict behaviors related to parenting and coparenting in similar ways. This finding adds to the prevailing view that the quality of family relationships, rather than the family structure per se, determine family functioning outcomes, such as parenting and coparenting (Cowan & Cowan, 2019).

Regarding hypothesized relations, a key finding of this study was the relation between mothers' and fathers' conflict behaviors and their coparenting alliance. Mothers' and fathers' destructive conflict was inversely associated with parents' ability to work together in their roles as caregivers, adding to the growing literature that hostility and anger expressed in the interparental relationship is likely to transfer to parents' shared parenting responsibilities (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). Although the directionality of effects is unclear (due to the nature of cross-sectional data), this finding is consistent with the spillover hypothesis, which suggests that affect and behaviors experienced in one aspect of the interparental relationship is expressed in kind in other family relationships (Cox, Paley, & Harter, 2001; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). The literature on these relations (i.e., destructive interparental conflict and coparenting alliance) is scant and mixed. For example, Christopher and colleagues (2015) reported that only fathers' reports of conflict, described as destructive, were negatively related to coparenting alliance (or

cooperative coparenting as referenced in the study). It is important to note that unlike in the current study, Christopher et al. (2015) assessed coparenting behaviors in the context of observed family triadic interactions that consisted of one score for mothers and fathers. However, it appears that similar methodological designs (i.e., mothers' and fathers' reports of parental conflict and coparenting) commensurate with current findings (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2009).

As expected, and congruent with the spillover hypothesis, constructive interparental conflict was positively related to parents' effective cooperation with each other in their parental responsibilities, suggesting that when parents feel respected and appreciated during disagreements, they are likely to cooperate and support each other in their role as caregivers. Previous research has only focused on the spillover effect of negative behaviors into coparenting alliance (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2009; Christopher et al., 2015). This study is the first to report on the transfer of positive behaviors from the quality of interparental relationship to parents' ability to effectively work together on issues related to their child's wellbeing. This finding adds to the literature on constructive interparental conflict suggesting that positive interparental interactions and behaviors during conflict (e.g., keeping a sense of humor during disagreements, actively listening to the other person, showing support and understanding) set the stage for effective and harmonious coparental relationships.

Another important finding was that fathers' destructive conflict was associated with their observed harsh parenting. That is, when fathers experienced and perceived greater levels of hostility in their relationship with the mother, they were likely to behave harshly with their children. However, considering a rather small effect size, this association may or may not be found in other context, and thus should be interpreted with caution. In contrast, mothers' destructive conflict was unrelated to their harsh parenting. These findings are consistent with

prior studies suggesting that, on average, fathers are more vulnerable to interparental discord or problems in interparental relationships than are mothers (Davies, Sturge-Apple, Woitach, & Cummings, 2009; Kerig, 2016). This phenomenon is known as a *fathering vulnerability hypothesis*, which suggests that mothers are more skilled at compartmentalizing their affect across different relationships and are better at preventing negative emotions and behaviors that are experienced in one family subsystem to influence the other (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Raymond, 2004). It is important to note that the spillover effect from interparental conflict to harsh paternal behaviors is not consistent across studies and may vary by methodological approaches (e.g., whether the interparental conflict variable is treated as a single construct for mothers and fathers or as separate variables for mothers and fathers; application of variable-centered or person-centered analyses). More research in this area is needed to disentangle these links. Moreover, and contrary to the hypothesized predictions, there was no evidence of spillover effects of destructive interparental conflict to other parenting behaviors.

Regarding nonsignificant findings for the relation between constructive interparental conflict and parenting behaviors, limited research in this area is mixed. For example, in two independent samples of children in middle childhood, scholars investigated the link between conflict behaviors and aspects of supportive parenting that were measured in the current study. In doing so, McCoy and colleagues (2013) reported that constructive interparental conflict, which was measured by averaging reports from both parents, was positively associated with mothers' and fathers' parental self-reported warmth, but Coln and colleagues (2013) did not find a significant relation between mother-reported constructive conflict and mothers' positive parenting, which included involvement (paternal parenting was not assessed in the study). These discrepancies may be due to differences in methodological approaches. It is also possible that

constructive conflict has unique implications on some aspects of parenting and not others.

Clearly, more research is needed to understand the effects of constructive conflict on parenting, especially among diverse couples with young children.

Our last goal was to explore whether marital status matters with respect to each construct assessed in the study. Research comparing married to unmarried (i.e., cohabiting) couples suggests that married couples are advantaged on various relationship aspects (e.g., fewer disagreements, greater relationship stability; Carlson & McLanahan, 2006; Brown, 2003; Brown, Manning, & Payne, 2017). However, given the widespread changes in family structure, it is believed that cohabiting and married couples are now more indistinguishable (Musick & Bumpass, 2012). We thus tested how different or similar our sample was on key variables by family structure. We found that married mothers experienced what might be referred to as healthy and positive conflict patterns that are identified by higher levels of constructive and lower levels of destructive conflict in the relationship, followed by cohabiting, and then non-cohabiting mothers. Married and unmarried fathers did not differ, but they were more likely than non-cohabiting fathers to enjoy the benefits of these positive conflict patterns. These findings show gender differences in the effects of marriage that have been supported in other work (e.g., Brown et al., 2017), suggesting that marriage for mothers is associated with more positive and less negative interpersonal behaviors. It is possible that mothers with more adaptive approach to interpersonal conflict select into marriage and it may also signify that marriage provides certain level of security for mothers as they feel more confident in their partner's commitment and shared parental responsibilities. In terms of outcome variables, we found that in comparison to cohabiting and non-cohabiting parents, married parents exhibited more supportive and less harsh parenting behaviors when interacting with their children. Although, married and unmarried

parents did not differ from each other on reports of coparenting alliance, they were more likely than non-cohabiting parents to be more supportive of each other in their parenting roles.

Taken together, it appears that non-cohabiting parents were the most disadvantaged group as they experienced more hostility in the relationship and were less likely to parent sensitively and be supportive of each other in their coparental responsibilities. Despite variations in the mean levels of specific behaviors, when family processes are considered together (i.e., relations between family subsystems), the effect of family structure plays a less critical role (Cowan & Cowan, 2019). In other words, regardless of the family structure, the emotions that parents feel when they interact with each other inadvertently spill over to the way that they coparent. If the mother feels that she is criticized, she would then be less likely to think that she and her partner are good at solving problems when it comes to raising their child. These findings point to the complex nature of family relationships and highlight the importance of such research.

Strengths and Limitations

The current study had a number of notable strengths. First, considering potential gender differences in the spillover process, mothers' and fathers' conflict behaviors were examined separately. Second, the current study is the first to simultaneously test both mothers' and fathers' parenting behaviors and coparenting alliance in one model showing that the coparental relationship is influenced by conflict behaviors for mothers and fathers. Third, the analyses included data from low-income unmarried couples (at least at conception of their child) that are largely understudied and considered at a relatively high-risk for dysfunction in multiple areas of family functioning.

Several limitations should be noted as well. First, the analyses of the current study were cross-sectional precluding us from making conclusions about potential causality between the

study variables. As such, these findings and interpretation of results should be regarded with caution. In the future, it would be more informative to use longitudinal data to examine directionality of effects and also use diary data through which researchers can assess the immediate impact of interparental conflict on family processes. Second, interparental conflict was a measure of reported conflict in the relationship and the perception of the other parent's behaviors, which may not precisely reflect the actual behaviors. Thus, in future studies, researchers should consider observational measures of conflict as well as self-reported data. It may also be beneficial to include observed measures of coparental alliance. Third, and relevant to the assessment of interparental conflict, we were unable to capture interdependency of interparental conflict on the other parent's parenting. It might be valuable for future inquiries to consider mutual influences in dyadic data. Lastly, although the findings of the current study add to the literature on family processes in low-income unmarried couples, the results may not generalize to higher income families. Replication of these findings in other samples is merited.

Conclusions and Implications

Overall, current findings support the claim that interparental conflict behaviors may set the stage for parents' ability to work together as a team and share their parenting responsibilities (Feinberg, 2003; Kitzmann, 2000). Further, given scarcity of research on constructive interparental conflict (McCoy et al., 2013), the results of the current study highlight the need to differentiate between the types of conflict behaviors for mothers and fathers to account for potential gender differences in the spillover processes, and to consider different methodological approaches to elucidate the spillover effect from interparental relationships to other areas of family functioning (e.g., parenting). Because of the mean differences in family structure, married parents were more advantaged than cohabiting and non-cohabiting parents with respect to

conflict behaviors, but it could also be that individuals who use constructive conflict are more likely to pursue greater levels of commitment because of the appreciation and respect they have for one another (see Kopystynska et al., 2017), and thus are more likely to marry. For the development of intervention programs, current findings highlight the need to focus on promoting adaptive conflict management behaviors rather than focusing solely on the family structure (e.g., marriage promotion), which was the goal of the BSF project from which the data were drawn to conduct the current analyses. In other words, rather than placing high value on marriage as a desired outcome, it might be beneficial to design intervention programs that strengthen couples' relationships through education on conflict management.

There is a shortage of studies examining interparental conflict as a predictor of coparenting alliance (Christopher et al., 2015). Moreover, only negative aspects of conflict (i.e., destructive) have been linked coparenting behaviors. Given that close relationships are characterized by some degree of conflict, it is important to understand if differences in conflict management contribute to changes in how well parents work together raising their child across different family configurations. This study adds to the literature by simultaneously examining the direct relations between specific conflict strategies and each parents' parenting and coparenting behaviors across families in which parents live together and those in which parents live separately. The results suggest that destructive conflict is related to low coparenting alliance whereas constructive conflict is associated with high levels of coparenting alliance for mothers and fathers, regardless of the family structure. Additionally, only fathers' destructive conflict is positively related to their own harsh parenting behaviors. These findings might have important implications for effective prevention and intervention programs that focus on strengthening couples' relationships that support harmonious family climates.

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Table 1

Demographic Information

Variable	W0	W0	W2	W2
	Mother	Father	Mother	Father
Age (years): <i>M/SD</i>	22.0/4.9	24.2/6.1		
Race/Ethnicity				
African American	52.0%	55.4%		
White/Caucasian	20.6%	17.42%		
Latino/Hispanic	10.0%	12.1%		
Other	19.0%	16.9%		
Education				
High school diploma	50.2%	45.6%		
GED (equivalency)	8.9%	12.9%		
No secondary education	32.3%	33.7%		
Other	8.5%	6.4%		
Annual earnings				
None	20.0%	6.0%		
\$1 to \$19,999	66.9%	63.0%		
\$20,000 to \$34,999	5.2%	18.6%		
\$35,000 and above	1.0%	5.1%		
Living together				
<i>Number of respondents</i>	3,457	3,456	2,808	2,153
All the time	71.8%	71.7%	44.4%	53.8%
Most of the time	8.4%	9.4%	7.9%	8.3%
Some of the time	9.8%	10.5%	6.6%	8.1%
Never/none of the time	10.1%	8.3%	41.0%	29.8%
Marital status				
<i>Number of respondents</i>	3,462	3,462	2,816	2,153
Married	7.3%	7.5%	23.5%	27.7%

Note. W0 = baseline, W2 = child is approximately 36 months old.

Table 2

Zero-order Correlations of Study Variables

Study Variables	Ns		Range	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	M/SD	M/SD
	M	F									M	F
1. Constr conf	2,330	1,992	1-4	.40**	-.57**	.02	-.02	.64**	-.09**	-.11**	3.14/.75	3.25/.67
2. Destruct conf	2,329	1,992	1-4	-.64**	.36**	-.00	.06*	-.42**	.10**	.18**	2.26/.79	2.26/.74
3. Supp parent	1,705	1,230	1-7	.02	-.02	.27**	-.41**	.07*	<u>-.02</u>	.03	4.60/.85	4.57/.84
4. Harsh parent	1,705	1,230	1-7	-.03	.05	-.42**	.18**	-.01	.08**	-.02	2.72/.97	2.59/.95
5. Coparent	2,653	2,059	1-5	.72**	-.50**	.04	-.05*	.45**	-.12**	-.04		4.37/.74
											3.94/1.12	
6. Dep symp	2,122	2,770	1-4	-.20**	.19**	<u>-.07*</u>	.07**	-.21**	.16**	.06**	16.23/5.7	16.77/6.10
											9	
7. Financ diff	2,778	2,132	0-1	-.14**	.17**	.04	.02	-.10**	.03	.22**	.54/.79	.49/.77

Note. Diagonal outside borders include bivariate correlations between mothers' and fathers' data. Bivariate correlations for fathers are above the diagonal borders and bivariate correlations for mothers are below the diagonal borders. M = mother, F = father, Constr conf = constructive conflict, Destruct conf = destructive conflict, Supp parent = supportive parenting, Harsh parent = harsh parenting, Coparent = coparenting alliance, Dep symp = depressive symptoms, Financ diff = financial difficulties.

The underlined correlations indicate that differences in significance might be due to the difference in sample sizes for mothers and fathers as suggested by the Fisher a-to-z transformation.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT, PARENTING, AND COPARENTING

Table 3

Unstandardized Means and Standard Deviations of Conflict Behaviors by Family Structure for Mothers and Fathers

Variable	Range	Comparison	Married		Cohabiting		Non-cohabiting		Mean Diff
			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
M Constructive (<i>N</i> =2,330)	1-4		3.41	.58	3.32	.61	2.62	.83	
		Married vs. Cohabiting							.08*
		Married vs. Non-cohabiting							.78**
		Cohabiting vs. Non-cohabiting							.70**
M Destructive (<i>N</i> =2,329)	1-4		2.06	.73	2.16	.73	2.59	.83	
		Married vs. Cohabiting							-.10*
		Married vs. Non-cohabiting							-.52**
		Cohabiting vs. Non-cohabiting							-.42**
F Constructive (<i>N</i> =1,992)	1-4		3.47	.49	3.39	.56	2.86	.79	
		Married vs. Cohabiting							.08
		Married vs. Non-cohabiting							.61**
		Cohabiting vs. Non-cohabiting							.53**
F Destructive (<i>N</i> =1,992)	1-4		2.15	.68	2.16	.71	2.52	.78	
		Married vs. Cohabiting							-.01
		Married vs. Non-cohabiting							-.37**
		Cohabiting vs. Non-cohabiting							-.37**

M = mother, F = father

* $p \leq .05$, ** $p < .01$

INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT, PARENTING, AND COPARENTING

Table 4

Unstandardized Means and Standard Deviations of Outcome Variables by Family Structure for Mothers and Fathers

Variable	Range	Comparison	Married		Cohabiting		Non-cohabiting		Mean Diff
			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
M Supp parent (<i>N</i> =1,705)	1-7		4.72	.83	4.57	.84	4.56	.87	
		Married vs. Cohabiting							.15*
		Married vs. Non-cohabiting							.16**
		Cohabiting vs. Non-cohabiting							.01
M Harsh parent (<i>N</i> =1,705)	1-7		2.57	.93	2.74	.95	2.78	1.00	
		Married vs. Cohabiting							-.16*
		Married vs. Non-cohabiting							-.21**
		Cohabiting vs. Non-cohabiting							.05
M Coparent (<i>N</i> =2,653)	1-5		4.55	.49	4.47	.61	3.10	1.20	
		Married vs. Cohabiting							.08
		Married vs. Non-cohabiting							1.46**
		Cohabiting vs. Non-cohabiting							1.38**
F Supp parent (<i>N</i> =1,230)	1-7		4.66	.82	4.49	.84	4.61	.84	
		Married vs. Cohabiting							.17**
		Married vs. Non-cohabiting							.05
		Cohabiting vs. Non-cohabiting							.12
F Harsh parent (<i>N</i> =1,230)	1-7		2.51	.89	2.67	.99	2.58	.94	
		Married vs. Cohabiting							-.16*
		Married vs. Non-cohabiting							-.07
		Cohabiting vs. Non-cohabiting							.09
F Coparent (<i>N</i> =2,059)	1-5		4.65	.42	4.60	.47	3.87	.93	
		Married vs. Cohabiting							.05
		Married vs. Non-cohabiting							.79**
		Cohabiting vs. Non-cohabiting							.74**

M = mother, F = father, Coparent = coparenting alliance, Supp parent = supportive parenting, Harsh parent = harsh parenting

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT, PARENTING, AND COPARENTING

Figure 1. Supported relations between the study variables. Solid lines = significant associations; dashed lines = non-significant associations. Coefficients shown are standardized.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$