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TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD: EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
MARITAL SATISFACTION, PARENTING, AND STRESS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study is to understand the relation between couple relationship quality, parent adjustment (stress and efficacy), and parenting quality. The study consisted of 169 heterosexual couples expecting the birth of their first child at the time of recruitment. At six months after birth, participants completed in-home questionnaires and engaged in videotaped interactions to assess behaviors and feelings related to the couple relationship, parenting adjustment, and parenting.

The four aims of this study are to: (1) understand the relationship between the marital relationship and parenting self-efficacy, (2) understand the relationship between parental self-efficacy and style of parenting, (3) understand the relationship between parenting stress and parenting quality, and (4) understand the relationship between a mother and father's experience involving the marital relationship, parenting quality, and parenting stress.

Correlations were run to understand the relationship between the four major variables. Results indicate a significant relationship between marital quality and parental self-efficacy. In addition, results found a significant relationship between parental self-efficacy and style of parenting (overreactivity and laxness). Third, results found a significant relationship between parenting stress and parenting quality (overreactivity). Finally, results showed significant relationships between mother and father ratings of all three variables.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Becoming a parent is one of the biggest changes and challenges a couple can experience. Research suggests that satisfaction within the marriage declines overtime, but first-time parents experience a steeper and more sudden decline in marital satisfaction than those who are not parents (Adler-Baeder, 2007). Declines in marital satisfaction are likely to consist of lower levels of marital love and marital satisfaction, which can affect a parent's level of self-efficacy and parenting stress. In turn, the levels of parents' self-efficacy and stress can affect the relationship between parent and child (Crockenberg, 1981). Below, evidence is reviewed to show the importance of the marital relationship (including marital love and conflict), and parenting (including parent self-efficacy, overreactivity/laxness), and stress as they relate to parent-child outcomes. Evidence will also be reviewed to understand the relationship between a mother's and father's levels of marital love and conflict, self-efficacy, and stress, and how they relate to the relationship with their child.

Marital Relationship

The quality of one's marriage is important in countless life situations. Levels of marital love and marital conflict can act either as protective factors or risk factors for levels of marital satisfaction and parenting satisfaction (Rodgers, 1998). Many researchers agree with the Spillover Model, which suggests that feelings of mood, affect, or behavior can transfer from one setting to another (Buehler, 2011). In many cases, the

spillover begins with the marital relationship and transfers into other situations both positive and negative. The Spillover Model suggests that the relationship one has with a partner will have a significant impact on the relationship one has with a child, and vice versa.

Marital Love and Parenting

Marital love is thought to be a driving force predicting overall marital quality and marital satisfaction (Rodgers, 1998). Levels of affection, sexual interest, and love are likely to predict long-term relationship outcomes, which may include having children (Stapleton, 2012). Positive marital processes can set the stage for positive parenting. Feeling satisfied in one's marriage is likely to spill over into satisfaction with one's parenting. Sharing positive marital behaviors has been shown to predict more supportive and understanding parenting, meaning that those who have loving and trusting marital relationships are also more likely to have loving and trusting parent-child relationships (Stapleton, 2012). In addition, feeling secure in one's marriage predicts more effective cooperation and co-parenting after the birth of a first child (Rodgers, 1998). A mother and father's level of marital love is highly correlated with the warmth they will show towards their child, which can influence their relationship with their child (Pedro, 2012). Overall, a high level of marital love is likely to contribute to positive child outcomes, such as low levels of anxiety, and high levels of self-esteem which can ultimately contribute to the child's success (Day, 2009).

Marital Conflict and Parenting

The spillover of negative affect from a marital relationship to a parent-child relationship has been shown to be substantial (Buehler, 2011). High levels of conflict in the marriage can lead to 50% greater chance of a tense interaction with one's child (Buehler, 2011). High levels of conflict are associated with a greater probability of ineffective parenting by both mothers and fathers. Reasons for this relation could be: parents become too absorbed by the marital problems, making them less motivated to interact effectively with their child; the parents may be unable to shield their child from the intense negativity, making them seem coercive and rejecting; or the parents have ineffective conflict management skills both in the relationship with their partner and their child (Kaczynski, 2012). Regardless of the reason, couple conflict can reduce the emotional availability of the parents for the child and make the parents less able to recognize and respond to their child's emotional needs (Stapleton, 2012).

Marital conflict has been linked to ineffective parenting and child maladjustment. Parents who suffer substantial levels of conflict in their marriage are more likely to show higher use of harsh discipline, reduced parental involvement, and more frequent parent-child conflict in their parenting (Buehler, 2011). Coercive and ineffective discipline techniques following marital conflict include the use of spanking or slapping the child. Reduced parental involvement includes less reading and playing with one's child, which can also result in less parental acceptance. More frequent parent-child conflict includes more frustration and yelling within the relationship. All three factors are key contributors to ineffective parenting and can lead to child maladjustment.

Parenting

The quality of parenting is arguably the most important factor for every child's well-being. While there are many factors that predict parenting quality, the satisfaction within the marital relationship proves to be one of the most consistent. As previously stated, the levels of love and conflict within one's marriage are consistently linked to the levels of parental self-efficacy and parenting stress. Both self-efficacy and parenting stress have major impacts on the style of parenting, such as levels of overreactivity or laxness, which a person can choose to use with their child. The style of parenting can have life-long lasting implications for the child's development. High levels of overreactivity or laxness can have negative consequences on the child's adjustment and development.

Parental Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined as a parent's belief in their ability to effectively manage the varied tasks and situations of parenthood. Levels of self-efficacy have been shown to directly affect the quality of care provided to children (Sanders, 2005). High levels of self-efficacy have been shown to predict higher quality parent-toddler interactions, higher parental sensitivity, warmth, and higher responsiveness to the child's needs (Sanders, 2005). In contrast, low levels of self-efficacy can be a risk factor for the development of a child's emotional and behavioral problems. Low levels of parental self-efficacy increase a child's levels of anxiety and depression and decrease a child's self-esteem, school performance, and school competence. In addition, low levels of self-efficacy can lead to

high levels of stress for the parents and can predict ineffective parenting techniques, such as high levels of overreactivity and laxness.

Overreactivity

Overreactivity is defined as a form of parenting that usually contains irritation, anger, or harsh discipline towards a child in the face of adversity. This irritation or frustration can be exhibited by yelling or disciplining more severely than planned (Passini, 2013). Overreactivity is predicted to occur due to low levels of parenting self-efficacy and feeling as though the stress of parenting is out of one's control (Passini, 2013). Researchers have found that having low levels of self-efficacy can lead to coercive parenting practices, which are overly harsh and sometimes abusive. This coercive and ineffective form of parenting is thought to contribute to the development and maintenance of both child internalizing and externalizing behaviors such as high levels of stress, non-compliance, and poor emotion understanding (Guajardo, Snyder, & Peterse, 2008).

Laxness

Parental laxness is defined as a lack in rigor, strictness, or firmness regarding limits and expectations of children. Lax discipline involves not following through with threatened consequences or dropping initial requests for compliance (Passini, 2013). Laxness, in addition to overreactivity, is thought to develop from a parent's low level of self-efficacy and feelings as though parenting is out of one's control (Passini, 2013). Researchers have found that this inconsistent and permissive form of parenting is linked

to a child's behavioral and emotional problems such as high levels of non-compliance and low levels of emotion understanding (Guajardo, Snyder, & Peterse, 2008).

Parenting Stress

Stress is a risk factor for both the marital relationship and the parenting relationship. Increased levels of stress are known to affect one's marital relationship, style of parenting, and quality of the parent-child relationship, which can potentially lead to child maladjustment. The relationship between marital conflict and stress is bidirectional (Rodgers, 1998), meaning that either one can precede the other, but this thesis will focus on the effect of the marital relationship on total levels of stress in addition to the effect of parenting stress on the parenting relationship.

Parenting Stress and Marital Conflict and Love

Increased marital conflict is known to lead to decreased levels of love within the marital relationship and increased total levels of stress (Randall, 2012). Stressors include minor disagreements, daily hassles, conflict regarding leisure time and sexual activity, and low relationship satisfaction (Randall, 2012). The stress that follows low relationship satisfaction is likely to affect one's marital relationship in addition to parenting. If a person does not maintain a relationship that has high levels of love and low levels of conflict, it can be an added risk factor to developing a high-stress situation within the parent-child relationship. In contrast, a high level of marital love and a low level of marital conflict protect against high levels of stress within the parent-child relationship (Randall, 2012). If a person feels loved and supported by their partner, they are more

likely to discuss daily stressors and conflicts with their partner, which can be protective against high levels of stress that could possibly lead to harsh parenting toward their children.

Parenting Stress and Parenting

Research has found that increased levels of stress are associated with less emotional availability in parents (Randall, 2012). Emotional availability is defined as high levels of sensitivity, structuring, non-intrusiveness, and non-hostility in parent-child interactions. Parents who reported high levels of stress recorded lower levels of emotional availability, which decreased the quality of the parent-child relationship. These results suggest that as a parent's level of stress increases, resulting from marital conflict or daily hassles, the levels of dyadic pleasure will decrease and parents are more likely to behave in hostile ways towards their children (McMahon, 2012). 'Hostile' parenting is defined as behaving with the child in an abrasive, impatient, or antagonistic manner (McMahon, 2012). This style of parenting is very similar to overreactivity, which is known to lead to increased negative interactive cycles between parent and child. A multitude of negative interactive cycles between a parent and child hinders the quality of the parent-child relationship, and could result in child maladjustment (McMahon, 2012).

Relationships between Mothers and Fathers

It has been suggested that the mother's relationship with her child is richer and more complex than the father's (Sanders, 2005). Because of this hypothesized depth, mothers have been thought to experience both more reward and more strain within the

relationship. Maternal distress is thought to be significantly related to overreactivity in the parent-child relationship and mothers consistently report more arguments with their children than do fathers (Rodgers, 1998). In comparison, paternal distress is significantly related to the total level of stress of the mother. Reasons for the discrepancy between mother and father scores are thought to result from social influences. Fathering is thought to be more influenced by the family and community factors than mothering (Crockenberg, 1981). The father's relationship with his child is thought to be more dependent on the mother, including the mother's attitudes towards his parenting, her expectations of the father, and her support offered for the father-child relationship (Buehler, 2011). Support offered by the mother predicts a more positive parent-child relationship for the father, and the mother's positivity towards the marital relationship leads to an increased dyadic security of the father-child relationship (Stapleton, 2012).

The quality of the marital relationship is also thought to be more vital to the father-child relationship than the mother-child relationship—meaning that when marital tension is high, fathers can feel unsupported and may disengage from active involvement with their children (Kaczynski, 2012). Levels of conflict within the marriage are thought to affect the father's parenting more than the mother's parenting (Laurent, 2008). Men were found to be more likely to experience tension spillover in the parent-child relationship than mothers, which is thought to be from fathers experiencing less scripted social conventions and more vulnerable to the couple relationship (Pedro, 2012).

Additionally, researchers found a strong degree of stress spillover among partners, meaning that as one partner's stress level increased, the other partner's stress level did the same. This is especially dangerous regarding parents, for as one's level of stress increases

and affects their relationship with their child, the other partner's parenting may be becoming more negative too. This relationship is thought to be stronger regarding fathers, meaning that as a mother's level of stress increases, it may affect the father's level of stress significantly (Pedro, 2012). A father's level of stress is also thought to spillover directly into parenting more so than the mothers. A father's total level of stress predicts overreactivity in parenting more than a mother's total level of stress (Pedro, 2012). Reasons for this discrepancy are uncertain, but researchers believe this can either be due to the nature of the father-figure, being less focused on daily emotions, or the belief that mothers are naturally more nurturing with their children (Pedro, 2012.)

The Current Study

The present study aims to understand the many factors that can affect the quality of the parent-child relationship including the complexity of marriage, parenting, stress, and gender. In this study, the relationships between marital satisfaction, parental self-efficacy, style of parenting, levels of stress, as well as the relationships between mothers and fathers are studied among families after the birth of a first child. The study was based on the following four aims:

Aim 1

The first aim of this paper is to examine the association between the marital relationship and parenting. The marital relationship is defined by levels of marital love and marital conflict. Parenting is defined by the level of parental self-efficacy and parenting stress. Based on past research, it is hypothesized that having high levels of

marital love and low levels of marital conflict will increase one's level of parental self-efficacy. In addition, it is hypothesized that high levels of marital love will decrease one's level of parenting stress and having high levels of marital conflict will increase one's level of parenting stress. The relations among partner's ratings of the marital relationship and parenting will also be examined.

Aim 2

The second aim of the study is to determine the relation between parental self-efficacy and style of parenting, as represented by laxness and overreactivity. Based on past research, it is hypothesized that low levels of parent self-efficacy will be associated with higher levels of overreactivity and laxness in the parent-child relationship. The relations among partners' ratings of parental self-efficacy and style of parenting will also be examined.

Aim 3

The third aim of this study is to understand the relation between parenting stress and parenting quality. This aim is further specified to understand the effect of stress on the levels of overreactivity and laxness in the parent-child relationship. Based on past research, it is hypothesized that high levels of stress will lead to an increase in overreactivity and laxness in the parent-child relationship.

Aim 4

The fourth and final aim of this study is to understand the relations between a mother and father's experience involving the marital relationship, parenting quality, and parenting stress. Based on past research, it is hypothesized that as one partner's level of marital love or conflict increases, so will their partners'. In addition, as one person's level of overreactivity or laxness increases in the parent-child relationship, so will their partner's level of overreactivity and laxness. Finally, as one person's level of stress increases in the parent-relationship, so will their partners' level of stress in the parent-child relationship.

Chapter 2

METHODS

Participants

Participants were 169 heterosexual couples that, at the time of recruitment, were expecting their first child. All couples were at least 18 years of age and were living together regardless of marital status. Mean ages of participants were 28.33 years for mothers and 29.76 years for fathers. Eighty-two percent of couples were married, and the mean length of knowing the partner was 6.6 years. Respondents indicated a broad range of backgrounds, with the largest population being white: 91% White, 4% Black, 2% Asian, and 1% Hispanic for the mothers and 90% White, 5% Black, 1% Asian, <1% Hispanic, <1% American Indian, and 2% other for fathers. Median annual family income was \$65,000 (SD=\$34,372), with a range from \$2,500 to \$162,500. Average educational attainment was 15.06 years for mothers and 14.51 years for fathers, with a range of 9th grade to beyond college.

Procedure

Couples were sampled by recruiting through means of childbirth education (81%), other health centers/doctors (8%), ads and publicity (7%), word of mouth (3%), or unknown means (1%). Data was collected in a multimethod, multimeasure study between 2003 and 2007. Pretest data was collected during home interviews when mothers were

pregnant. Mothers and fathers separately completed in-home questionnaires and together engaged in videotaped interactions.

After pretest, couples were randomly assigned to intervention ($n=89$) or no-treatment control groups ($n=80$). The randomization yielded equivalent groups, and there were no significant differences between the intervention and control group. The no-treatment couples received a brochure about selecting quality childcare, while the intervention couples received four prenatal and four postnatal sessions in a structured Family Foundations program.

Follow-up data was collected in three additional waves. Wave 2 was collected through the mail when the child was six months old, Wave 3 was collected in home at age one, and Wave 4 was collected in home at age three. Information for the time at which each scale was collected can be found in Tables 1-4 in the appendix.

Measures

Marital Relationship: Marital Love and Marital Conflict

The marital relationship was assessed with a 14-item, 9-point Likert scale (Braiker & Kelly, 1979) that ranged from ‘not at all’ to ‘very much’ in regard to the marital relationship. Two subscales under the marital relationship included marital love, which included the sum of 9 questions, and marital conflict, which included the sum of 5 questions. Examples of questions included ‘To what extent do you love your partner at this stage?’ and ‘How often do you feel angry or resentful towards your partner?’ The alpha for marital love was .79 for mothers and .78 for fathers and the alpha for marital conflict was .79 for mothers and .73 for fathers.

Parenting Self-Efficacy

Parent efficacy was assessed with the 16-item Parenting Sense of Competence scale, which measured how the new parent feels about their role as a caregiver (Gibaud-Wallston & Wandersman, 1978). The 7-point Likert scale ranged from ‘not at all like me’ to ‘completely like me.’ Examples of questions include ‘I feel confident in my role as a parent’ or ‘I trust my feelings and intuitions about taking care of my baby.’ The alpha was .84 for mothers and .83 for fathers.

Parenting Practices: Overreactivity and Laxness

Parental practices were assessed using the Parenting Scale, which included 20 items on the discipline practices in parents of children from 18-48 months during the past two months (Arnold, O’Leary, Wolff & Acker, 1993). The 7-point Likert scale ranged from extremely permissive parenting to extreme authoritarian parenting. Parental practices had two subscales including parental laxness (permissive parenting) and parental overreactivity (authoritarian parenting). Laxness was measured with 11 items and included questions such as ‘I am the kind of parent that...lets my child do whatever.’ Overreactivity was assessed using 9 items and included questions such as ‘I am the kind of parent that...sets firm limits on what my child is allowed to do.’ The alphas for laxness were .85 for mothers and .82 for fathers and the alphas for overreactivity were .76 for mothers and .78 for fathers.

Parenting Stress

The levels of parenting stress that a parent feels was assessed using the Parenting Stress Index, which consisted of 27 items that measured parental distress, parent-child dysfunctional interaction, and difficult child in order to gain a more holistic view on total levels of stress for both mothers and fathers (Abidin, 1997). All items were on a five-point scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree.' Examples of questions include 'I often have the feeling that I cannot handle things very well' or 'My child turned out to be more of a problem than I had expected.' The alpha was .90 for mothers and .87 for fathers.

Chapter 3

RESULTS

For the purpose of this study, results with $p < .001$ were considered to be statistically significant. Correlations were performed to examine the hypotheses of the study.

Aim 1: Examine the relationship between marital satisfaction and parenting self-efficacy and stress

The first aim of this paper was to understand how levels of marital love and marital conflict can affect the level of parental self-efficacy and parenting stress in both mothers and fathers. It was hypothesized that high levels of marital love will increase levels of parental self-efficacy and high levels of marital conflict will decrease levels of parental self-efficacy. In addition, high levels of marital love will decrease levels of parenting stress and high levels of marital conflict will increase one's level of parenting stress. Correlations were run with marital love and marital conflict, parenting self-efficacy, and parenting stress.

Marital Love and Parental Efficacy

Results partially showed that having high levels of marital love was significantly positively associated with parental efficacy, meaning that as levels of marital love increased, so did feelings of parenting efficacy. For mothers, a high level of marital love was significantly positively associated with levels of mothers' own parental efficacy

($r=.29$, $p<.001$) and their partner's ($r=.17$, $p<.001$). This result indicates that as a mother's level of marital love increases, not only will her own feelings of parental efficacy increase, but so will her partner's.

For fathers, a high level of marital love was significantly positively associated with fathers' own feelings of parental efficacy ($r=.24$, $p<.001$) but not with their partner's. This result indicates that as a father feels more love in their marriage, their levels of parental efficacy and confidence in their own parenting will increase, but will have no effect on the mother's level of parental efficacy.

Marital Conflict and Parental Efficacy

Results partially showed that having high levels of marital conflict was significantly negatively associated with parental efficacy, meaning that as levels of marital conflict increase, feelings of parental efficacy decrease. For mothers, a high level of marital conflict was significantly negatively associated with levels of mothers' own parental efficacy ($r=-.25$, $p<.001$) and their partners' ($r=-.23$, $p<.001$). This result indicates that when a mother experiences more conflict in the marriage, not only will her level of parenting efficacy decrease, but so will her partner's.

For fathers, however, a high level of marital conflict was not significantly associated with feelings of parental efficacy in either themselves or their partner. This result indicates that when a father experiences more conflict in the marriage, not only will his parenting efficacy remain the same, but so will his partner's.

Marital Love and Parenting Stress

Results partially showed that high levels of marital love was negatively associated with parenting stress, meaning that as a person's level of parenting love increases, their level of parenting stress will decrease. For mothers, high levels of marital love were significantly negatively associated with her own levels of parenting stress ($r=-.30$, $p<.001$) as well as their partner's ($r=-.28$, $p<.001$). This result indicates that when a mother feels more marital love, not only will her parenting stress decrease, but so will the levels of the fathers' parenting stress.

For fathers, high levels of marital love was significantly negatively associated with levels of parenting stress ($r=-.27$, $p<.001$) but not that of their partner. This result indicates that when a father feels more marital love, his own feelings of parenting stress decrease, but his partner's levels will not.

Marital Conflict and Parenting Stress

Results partially showed that high levels of marital conflict was positively associated with levels of parenting stress, meaning that as a person's level of marital conflict increases, so will their level of parenting stress. For mothers, a high level of marital conflict was significantly positively associated with mothers' parenting stress ($r=.30$, $p<.001$) as well as their partner's ($r=.28$, $p<.001$). This result indicates that as a mother feels more marital conflict in her marriage, not only will her own feelings of marital conflict increase, but so will her partner's.

For fathers, a high level of marital conflict was significantly positively associated with levels of fathers' own parenting stress ($r=.23$, $p<.001$) but not with their partner's. This result indicates that when a father feels more marital conflict in his marriage, his levels of stress will increase, but will have no effect on the mothers' level of parenting stress.

Aim 2: Examine the relationship between parental self-efficacy and style of parenting

The second aim of the study was to understand how a parent's level of self-efficacy can affect the style of parenting, as defined by overreactivity and laxness. It was hypothesized that high levels of parent self-efficacy will be associated with low levels of overreactivity and low levels of laxness. Correlations were run with parental self-efficacy, overreactivity, and laxness

Parental Self-Efficacy and Overreactivity

Results partially showed that having high levels of parental efficacy was significantly negatively associated with levels of overreactivity, meaning that as levels of parental efficacy increases, the levels of overreactivity decrease. For mothers, a high level of parental efficacy was significantly negatively associated with levels of mothers' own overreactivity ($r=-.31$, $p<.001$), but not with fathers' overreactivity. This result indicates that as a mother feels more confident in her own parenting, the level of harsh or abrasive parenting will decrease, but her partner's level will not.

For fathers, a high level of parental efficacy was significantly negatively associated with levels of fathers' overreactivity ($r=-.29$, $p<.001$), but not that of their partner. This result indicates that as a father feels more confident in his own parenting, the level of his harsh or abrasive parenting will decrease, but his partner's level will not.

Parental Self-Efficacy and Laxness

Results partially support the hypothesis that having high levels of parental efficacy will be significantly negatively associated with levels of laxness, meaning that as levels of parental efficacy increases, the level of laxness within the parent-child relationship decreases. For mothers, a high level of parental efficacy was significantly negatively associated with levels of mothers' laxness ($r=-.33$, $p<.001$), but not with fathers' laxness. This result indicates that as a mother feels more confident in her own parenting, the level of uninvolved or negligent parenting will decrease, but her partner's level will not.

For fathers, a high level of parental efficacy was not found to be significantly negatively associated with levels of laxness in their own parent-child relationship or their partner's. This result indicates that as a father's level of parental efficacy increases, his level of laxness will remain stable; meaning his style of parenting could possibly remain uninvolved or negligent regardless of how confident he is in his own parenting.

Aim 3: Examine the relationship between parental stress and parenting style.

The third aim of the study was to understand how a parent's level of stress can affect levels of overreactivity and laxness. Correlations were run with stress, marital love and marital conflict, as well as overreactivity and laxness.

Parenting Stress and Overreactivity

It was hypothesized that high levels of parenting stress will be positively associated with levels of overreactivity, meaning that as a person's level of stress increases, so will the level of overreactivity in the parent-child relationship. For mothers, a high level of stress was not found to be significantly positively associated with mothers' levels of overreactivity or fathers' levels of overreactivity. This result indicates that as a mother feels more stress in her daily life, it will not make her or her partner more likely to interact with their child in a harsh or abrasive manner.

For fathers, a high level of stress was found to be significantly positively associated with fathers' levels of overreactivity ($r=.25$, $p<.001$) but not mothers' levels of overreactivity. This result indicates that as a father feels more stress in his daily life, it could cause him to interact with his child in a harsher or more abrasive manner, but will have no effect on the mother-child interaction.

Parenting Stress and Laxness

It was hypothesized that high levels of stress will be positively associated with levels of laxness, meaning that as a person's level of stress increases, so will the level of laxness in the parent-child relationship. For both mothers and fathers, a high level of

stress was not found to be significantly positively associated with personal levels of laxness or their partner's levels of laxness. This result indicates that as a parent feels more stress in their daily life, it will not cause them or their partner to engage in less strict or neglecting parenting.

Aim 4: Examine the relations between a mother and father's experience involving the marital relationship, parenting quality, and parenting stress.

The fourth and final aim of this study was to understand the relationships between a mother and father's experience involving the marital relationship (including marital love and marital conflict), parenting quality (including overreactivity and laxness), and parenting stress.

Marital Relationship

Based on past research, it was hypothesized that the levels of marital love and conflict of one partner will affect the levels of marital love and conflict of their partner. This study found no exception.

Levels of marital love for the wife was significantly associated with the husband's levels of marital love ($r=.50$, $p<.001$) and marital conflict ($r=-.31$, $p<.001$), meaning that as the wife's level of marital love increased, the level of the husband's marital love increased and levels of the husband's marital conflict decreased, and vice versa.

In addition, level of marital conflict for the wife was significantly associated with the husband's level of marital love and marital conflict ($r=.53$, $p<.001$), meaning that as

the wife's level of marital conflict increased, the husband's level of marital love decreased and the husband's level of marital conflict increased, and vice versa.

Parenting Quality

Based on past research, it was hypothesized that the style of parenting of one parent can affect the style of parenting of their partner. For this study, the relationship between the parent's levels of overreactivity and laxness were studied. Results showed that as one partner's level of overreactivity increased, so did that of their partner ($r=.30$, $p<.001$). In addition, as one partner's level of laxness increased, so did that of their partner ($r=.42$, $p<.001$).

Parenting Stress

Based on past research, it is hypothesized that the level of parenting stress for one parent is positively associated with the level of parenting stress for their partner, meaning that either both are experiencing difficulty with the same situation, or that the level of stress can spill over into the stress level of their partner. Results in this study found that the mother's level of parenting stress was significantly positively associated with the father's level of stress ($r=.29$, $p<.001$).

Chapter 4

DISCUSSION

This study examined the relations between the marital relationship, parenting, and stress, and how those variables compare between mothers and fathers. Results supported the first hypothesis and confirmed a significant association between the marital relationship, defined by marital love and marital conflict, and parental self-efficacy. As a mother's or father's levels of marital love increased, their levels of parental self-efficacy also increased. What was interesting about this finding was the fact that a mother's level of marital love had a significant effect on the father's level of parenting self-efficacy, but not vice versa. These results indicate both mothers and fathers are reliant on feelings of marital love within their own parenting self-efficacy. In addition, a father's feeling of self-efficacy in parenting is highly dependent on the mother's feelings of love within the marital relationship, but the mother's parenting is not dependent on the father.

Results confirmed a significant relationship between marital conflict and parental self-efficacy. For mothers, a high level of marital conflict was significantly negatively associated with parental self-efficacy, meaning that if a mother experiences a high volume of conflict within her marriage, her confidence in parenting will decrease. In addition, a mother's level of marital conflict was significantly negatively associated with a father's feeling of self-efficacy, meaning that a mother's experience of conflict within the marriage will also affect the father's confidence in parenting. In comparison, a father's level of conflict within the marriage was not significantly associated with feelings of parental self-efficacy in themselves or their partner. This result could indicate

that fathers are more resistant to conflict within the marital relationship, meaning that experiencing conflict within the marriage is unlikely to cause changes in the parenting relationship.

This study also confirmed an association between marital love and parenting stress, meaning that as levels of marital love increase, the amount of parenting stress will decrease. For mothers, a high level of marital love was significantly negatively associated with levels of personal parenting stress as well as for her partner's. For fathers, a high level of marital love was significantly negatively associated with personal levels of parenting stress, but not for his partner's. These results indicate that a mother's levels of marital love has significant impacts on both partners' feelings of parenting stress, but the fathers levels of love will only affect his own feelings of parenting stress. The father's amount of love within the marital relationship will not necessarily affect his partner's levels of parenting stress.

Finally for the first aim, results showed high levels of marital conflict was significantly positively associated with high levels of parenting stress for both mothers and fathers. For mothers, a high level of marital conflict was positively associated with personal levels of parenting stress as well as for her partner. For fathers, a high level of marital conflict was significantly negatively associated with personal feelings of parenting stress but not for his partner. These results indicate that a mother's level of marital conflict has significant impacts on both partners' feelings of parenting stress, but the father's level of conflict will only affect his own feelings of parenting stress. The father's account of conflict within the marital relationship will not necessarily affect his partner's levels of parenting stress.

It was no surprise that having a healthy marital relationship, defined by high levels of love and low levels of conflict would have positive effects on parental self-efficacy and parenting stress. If parents feel secure, supported, and loved within their relationships, it is likely that will transfer feelings of confidence into their relationship with their child. Especially when faced with a first-born, the effect of the marital relationship can have substantial effects on the quality of parenting, and support from a partner can ensure confidence in one's parenting abilities as well as lower levels of parenting stress (Stevenson, 2007).

It was interesting to see the differences between the mother's and father's effects on their partner's parenting. In most cases, the mother had significant impacts on the father's parenting, but the fathers did not have significant impacts on the mother's parenting. This result was anticipated throughout the study. It was hypothesized that the father's parenting would be far more reliant on the mother's feelings regarding the marital relationship or the parenting relationship. Reasons for this reliance could be from social expectations of the mother maintaining primary childcare status regardless of the marital relationship, meaning that the mother is less reliant on the partner in order to maintain parenting control.

Results supported the second hypothesis, which predicted that high levels of parental self-efficacy will result in more a positive parenting style, defined by lower levels of parental overreactivity and laxness. For mothers, a high level of parental self-efficacy was significantly negatively associated with personal overreactivity but not for her partner's. In addition, for fathers, a high level of parental self-efficacy was significantly negatively associated with personal overreactivity but not for his partner's.

In both cases, the parent did not affect their partner in their levels of overreactivity based on feelings of parental self-efficacy. It is clear that the emergence of overreactivity in parenting is based solely on one's own feeling of parenting self-efficacy, and the partner's confidence in parenting has no significant effect.

Results also found that the level of parental self-efficacy has an effect on laxness in parenting. For mothers, a high level of parental self-efficacy was significantly negatively associated with recordings of laxness in their own parenting, but not for their partner's. In comparison, a father's level of parental self-efficacy was not significantly associated with levels of laxness in either their own parenting or their partner's parenting. These results show that a mothers with higher confidence in her parenting will likely show lower levels of laxness in parenting. However, a father's levels of confidence in parenting will have no effect on levels of laxness in parenting. It is possible for fathers to still exhibit laxness in the parenting relationship regardless of high levels of parenting self-efficacy. A possible reason for this association between self-efficacy and laxness could be that fathers typically spend less time with their child than mothers, and therefore have fewer opportunities to set strict guidelines or restrictions with their child.

Results partially supported the third hypothesis, which predicted that high levels of parenting stress would have significant impacts on parenting style. It was thought that a high level of stress would result in higher levels of parenting overreactivity and laxness. For mothers, a high level of parenting stress was not significantly associated with levels of overreactivity in personal parenting or her partner's. For fathers, a high level of parenting stress was significantly positively associated with levels of overreactivity in personal parenting but not for his partner. These findings show that a mother's level of

harshness in parenting is not reliant upon levels of stress. Even if a mother feels a high amount of stress in the parenting relationship, her chance of being overreactive towards her child does not increase. However, for fathers, a high level of parenting stress is more likely to lead to high levels of overreactivity. This positive association indicates that when a father feels stress in the parenting relationship, he may be prone to use rash or harsh parenting.

Neither the mother's nor the father's reports of parenting stress had significant positive relationships to their levels of laxness. This result indicates that when a mother or father had a high level of parenting stress, they were not likely to exhibit lax parenting techniques as a matter of coping.

It was surprising to see that a high level of stress was only related to overreactivity but not laxness in regards to style of parenting. It was hypothesized that a high level of stress could cause an individual to either set stricter limits with their child or to withdraw from their parenting duties, resulting in more lax boundaries and restrictions. However, it was found that both mothers and fathers had no significant association between stress and laxness, meaning that even as stress increases, their attentiveness with their child remains constant.

Finally, results supported the fourth aim of this study which examined the relations that one partners' experience could have on their partner's marital relationship, parent self-efficacy, style of parenting, and total stress. Results showed that the level of marital love and conflict is significantly positively associated among both partners. This result indicates that as one person's level of love or conflict increases, so will their

partner's. This result was expected, being that feelings of love and conflict are typically mutual and created together within a relationship.

Within the parenting relationship, results found that parenting style was significantly associated among couples. As one partner's level of overreactivity or laxness increased, so did their partner's. This result was also expected, being that parents will typically exhibit similar parenting techniques with their children.

Finally, results for the fourth hypothesis indicated that the level of stress for one partner is positively significantly related to the other partner. This result indicates that a mother and father's level of stress are dependent upon each other or due to the same stressful life situations, such as raising a difficult child or experiencing financial strain.

Chapter 5

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

Limitations

Generalizations from this study are limited by the study's sample. Although recruitment was randomized, the resulting population was predominantly white and middle-class, not providing an accurate summary of the population. Race and ethnicity may influence the relationships studied within this thesis, and this generally homogeneous sample may provide results that are not generalizable to other populations. In addition, the small sample size requires a cautious interpretation of any significant results, being that the small sample may have been unable to reveal significant results that a larger sample might.

This study also failed to determine the other countless factors, both intrinsic and extrinsic, that could affect one's marital relationship, parental self-efficacy, style of parenting, and levels of stress. The scope of the study was limited and did not examine other variables that could affect the marriage, such as infidelity or abuse, factors affecting the parent-child relationship, such as having a difficult infant or a child with a disability, or the external stress levels, such as economic hardship or stress at work. All of these variables could have key influences on the couples' everyday lives and as such can significantly affect their results.

Additionally, this study chose to only include heterosexual couples who were over the age of 18 and who were living together. This sample could potentially exclude many other couples who could have helped provide a clearer picture on the factors that could affect the parent-child relationship.

Finally, this study was based on correlational analyses, which are incapable of determining causality among variables. We are only able to examine the basic relationships among the variables rather than directional influence.

Future Studies

Results from this study are promising and encouraging of future research. Future studies would benefit from a larger and more diverse sample in order for the results to be generalizable to a larger population. In addition, this study was partial due to a limited scope. It would be beneficial to continue to look at additional variables and analyses in order to understand more about the relationships between the marital relationship, parenting, and stress. Finally, this study was conducted using self-report data. It would be helpful for future studies to use observational data in order to prevent self-report bias and skewed results.

Appendix A

Table 3-1: Descriptive Statistics Wave 1

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Dad Ineffective Arguing	166	8.00	33.00	18.43	5.64
Mom Ineffective Arguing	169	8.00	36.00	18.03	6.06
Dad Couple Efficacy	167	3.14	7.00	5.43	.56
Mom Couple Efficacy	168	1.71	7.00	5.51	1.10
Dad Total Desired Change	169	.00	94.00	25.43	19.79
Mom Total Desired Change	168	.00	114.00	25.87	20.26
Dad Marital Love	168	48.00	81.00	71.58	6.59
Mom Marital Love	169	43.00	81.00	73.63	6.74
Dad Marital Conflict	166	5.00	41.00	16.57	6.38
Mom Marital Conflict	169	6.00	43.00	48.50	7.18
Dad Parental Efficacy	166	51.00	109.00	86.38	11.67
Mom Parental Efficacy	169	39.00	112.00	86.73	13.60

Table 3-2: Descriptive Statistics Wave2

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Dad Parental Efficacy	149	52.00	111.00	86.15	12.04
Mom Parental Efficacy	152	52.00	112.00	94.50	11.04
Dad Psi Difficult Child	149	1.00	3.89	1.86	0.61
Mom Psi Difficult Child	152	1.00	3.33	1.83	0.60
Dad Psi P/C Dysfunctional Interaction	149	1.00	3.50	1.57	0.53
Mom Psi P/C Dysfunctional Interaction	152	1.00	3.00	1.36	0.46
Dad Psi Parental Distress	149	1.00	3.07	2.12	0.51
Mom Psi Parental Distress	152	1.00	3.50	2.27	0.58
Dad Psi Total Stress	149	1.00	3.07	1.91	0.45
Mom Psi Total Stress	152	1.03	3.11	1.92	0.43
Dad COP Brings Closer	149	0.80	6.00	4.86	0.98
Mom COP Brings Closer	152	1.20	6.00	4.78	1.12
Dad COP Agreement	149	0.75	6.00	4.77	1.07
Mom COP Agreement	152	2.00	6.00	4.90	0.99
Dad COP Support	147	2.00	6.00	4.99	0.78
Mom COP Support	152	1.00	6.00	4.85	1.15
Dad COP Exposure to Conflict	149	0.00	3.80	0.87	0.82
Mom COP Exposure to Conflict	152	0.00	5.00	0.89	0.94
Dad COP Undermining	149	0.00	3.80	0.68	0.82
Mom COP Undermining	152	0.00	4.60	0.51	0.76
Dad COP Division of Labor	149	1.50	6.00	5.11	1.07
Mom COP Division of Labor	150	0.00	6.00	4.07	1.57

Table 3-4: Descriptive Statistics Wave 4

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Dad Parenting Rewards	148	2.33	7.00	6.58	0.70
Mom Parenting Rewards	156	3.89	7.00	6.76	0.45
Total Child Enrichment	155	9.00	28.00	22.05	4.10

Table 3-4: Descriptive Statistics Wave 4

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Dad PASC Laxness	128	1.00	4.91	2.51	0.76
Mom PASC Laxness	137	1.00	4.64	2.38	0.80
Dad PASC Overreactivity	128	1.00	4.67	2.43	0.76
Mom PASC Overreactivity	137	1.00	4.22	2.38	0.68
Dad PCTS Psych Maltreatment Frequency	127	0.00	83.00	14.47	15.86
Mom PCTS Psych Maltreatment Frequency	137	0.00	58.00	11.89	11.84
Dad PCTS Physical Maltreatment Frequency	127	0.00	83.00	14.47	15.86
Mom PCTS Physical Maltreatment Frequency	137	0.00	73.00	10.58	14.86

Table 3-5: Correlations among variables

	Mom Marital Love (W1)	Dad Marital Love (W1)	Mom Marital Conflict (W1)	Dad Marital Conflict (W1)	Mom Parental Efficacy (W1)	Dad Parental Efficacy (W1)	Mom Laxness (W4)	Dad Laxness (W4)	Mom Over-Reactivity (W4)	Dad Over-Reactivity (W4)	Mom Stress (W2)	Dad Stress (W2)
Mom Marital Love	1											
Dad Marital Love	.50**	1										
Mom Marital Conflict	-.35**	-.36**	1									
Dad Marital Conflict	-.31**	-.36**	.53**	1								
Mom Parental Efficacy	.29**	.13	-.25**	-.14	1							
Dad Parental Efficacy	.17*	.24**	-.23**	-.21*	.20*	1						
Mom Laxness	-.10	-.05	.10	.06	-.33**	-.18*	1					
Dad Laxness	-.02	.07	.05	-.05	-.19*	-.14	.42**	1				
Mom Over-Reactivity	-.05	-.04	.16	.13	-.31**	-.12	.37**	.18*	1			
Dad Over-Reactivity	-.06	-.09	.21*	.27**	-.02	-.29**	.33**	.38**	.30**	1		
Mom Stress	-.30**	-.13	.30**	.13	-.60**	-.17*	.16	.07	.19*	-.01	1	
Dad Stress	-.28**	-.27**	.28**	.23**	-.19*	-.57**	.19*	.10	.15	.25**	.29**	1

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