

**THE CONTENT OF MARITAL CONFLICT AND CHILD OUTCOMES**

**THESIS**

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**By**

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

Conflict, as defined by Aldous (1977), “connotes serious disagreements among persons,” and “...occurs whenever two or more persons are engaging in or planning actions that are incompatible.” Family conflict has been recognized as having an adverse effect on children’s social, emotional, and behavioral development. Children exposed to this stressor are more likely than those children not exposed to conflict to exhibit emotional and behavioral problems (Katz & Gottman, 1993). According to Jenkins & Buccioni (2000) exposure to marital conflict has been found to be associated with a wide range of negative outcomes in children including conduct disorder, aggression, antisocial behavior, depression, and withdrawal. Parents who argue frequently and intensely (Goodman, et al. 1999) and fail to resolve their arguments may teach their children ineffective skills for resolving conflicts through modeling and patterns of reinforcement.

The literature focuses on how interparental conflict, specifically the frequency and intensity of such conflict, can negatively affect child outcomes (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Jouriles, Farris & McDonald, 1991). However, considerably less is known about how the content of the conflict relates to child outcomes (Demo & Cox, 2000; Cox &

Brooks-Gunn, 1999). The content of conflict refers to the basis of the conflict between parents that can include disagreements over child rearing beliefs, household chores, financial matters, etc. It is unclear whether disagreements in these areas are equally important to the children. It could be that specific topics like differing child-rearing beliefs could lead to inconsistent discipline, and affect child outcomes more so than other types of disagreements. Several researchers suggest that rather than address the question of an overall relation between marital conflict and adjustment, the question should instead be one that asks what specific aspects or dimensions of conflict are related to what particular aspects of child adjustment (Fincham, 1994; Demo & Cox, 2000; Cox & Brooks-Gunn, 1999). This study focuses on the effects of the content of interparental conflict on child outcomes. I hypothesize that conflict concerning the child is associated with greater behavioral problems in children than other areas of conflict such as household chores or financial matters. In addition, I will examine the parent-child relationship as a mediating factor to see what effect interparental conflict has on the relationship parents have with their children and to what extent this is related to child behavioral problems. Waves I and II of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) will be the dataset used to test these hypotheses.

## **Literature Review**

Research has revealed that there is an association between interparental conflict and child outcomes (Emery, 1982; Jenkins & Smith, 1991; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Osborne & Fincham, 1996; Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Jenkins & Buccioli, 2000). Several dimensions of marital conflict are important to consider and have been examined separately in various studies. The frequency, intensity, and in particular, content of conflict, may affect the stressfulness of marital conflict for children and thus may be related to the existence of child problems. The review that follows elaborates the research conducted in each of these dimensions of conflict and their association with child well-being.

## **Dimensions of Conflict**

*Frequency.* In terms of conflict, frequency refers to the amount of marital conflict to which children are exposed. According to Grych and Fincham (1990) frequent conflict can have two contrasting effects. First, it might lead to fewer behavioral problems in children because they have already become desensitized to interparental conflict. On the other hand, frequent conflict may sensitize children to conflict and lead to a greater degree of adjustment problems. Numerous research studies have supported the latter in that more frequent conflict may lead to increased behavioral problems in children. Cummings, Iannotti, & Zahn-Waxler (1985) found in a laboratory study that children

who had witnessed two angry confrontations between adult experimenters behaved more aggressively toward a playmate than those who had observed only one such conflict. The sight of people arguing, with raised voices and angry facial expressions is in itself frightening or distressing to children, but add to that more frequent occurrences and the effect is greater. Additional research evidence can be found in a study of naturally occurring episodes of interparental conflict. In another study, Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow (1981) found that children exposed to more frequent marital conflict reacted more intensely when exposed to a later episode of parental conflict than did children who had experienced less frequent conflict. Others argue that children are not desensitized by frequent marital conflict because repeated exposure to conflict likely increases children's feelings of emotional insecurity (Davies & Cummings, 1994). These authors suggest that the children's ability to regulate or control their emotions will be reduced and they will be more prone to feelings of fear and anger.

*Intensity.* Marital conflicts can vary in their intensity, ranging from discussing disagreements calmly to physical violence. The effect that intensity has on child behavioral problems may be dependent on the level of physical aggression present in the home. According to Grych and Fincham (1990), it may be that exposure to low-intensity conflict, even if it is frequent, is unrelated to child behavioral problems, but rather it is upsetting and damaging to children if it involves hostility or physical aggression.

Buehler, Krishnakumar, and Stone (1998) found similar results indicating that hostile

conflict styles may be more strongly associated with behavior problems than the frequency of disagreement. Several other studies have addressed the intensity of conflict. Amato and McNeal (1998) found that marital violence tends to have larger and more consistent associations with child outcomes than does nonviolent conflict. This outcome is consistent with the assumption in their study that marital violence places children at greater risk than does nonviolent discord. This evidence indicates that conflict involving physical aggression is more upsetting to children and may be more closely linked to behavior problems than less intense forms of conflict. Similarly, Holden and Ritchie (1991) found that children from violent families, where overt acts of physical aggression were present, reported having more internalizing problems, more difficult temperaments, and more aggressive tendencies. Furthermore, the literature on the subject of hostile interparental conflict suggests that the effects of such conflict on child adjustment are more indirect than direct (Buehler & Krishnakumar, 1994). For example, parents' support and control, parenting behaviors, and children's perceptions and attributions seem to affect child adjustment more than direct effects such as modeling, where children learn that fighting is an acceptable way to get what they want and for dealing with disagreements (Buehler & Krishnakumar, 1994).

*Content.* The content of marital conflict is another factor affecting child behavioral problems and adjustment. This is one area that seems to be underdeveloped in the literature, especially relative to its impact on children's responses. Conflict in terms

of content refers to the causes of the disagreements between parents. For example, parents can argue over child rearing beliefs, household chores, financial matters, etc. At issue is whether various types of disagreements differentially affect children.

Grych and Fincham (1990), suggest that conflict concerning the child may be more disturbing to the child than other types of conflict, and thus may be more closely related to behavior problems. An analogue study conducted by Grych and Fincham (1993) was one of the first to investigate children's responses to child versus non-child related conflict. Their sample included 157 11-12 year olds who came from homes where conflict was present. They had the children listen to audiotapes of a man and woman involved in disagreements about various topics. They were encouraged to use their imagination and picture the disagreements taking place between their parents. The series of disagreements on the tapes included both high and low intensity and child related and non-child related conflict. Their findings indicate that compared to conflict concerning topics unrelated to the child, children reacted to child-related conflicts with greater shame, self-blame, and fear of being drawn into the conflict (1993). An earlier study conducted by Block, Block, and Morrison (1981) provides additional research along these lines. These authors found that parental disagreement on child-rearing values predicted adjustment problems in children one to four years later and was related to externalizing problems in boys (i.e. aggression) and internalizing problems in girls (i.e. depression and anxiety). However, their study only included a sample of 100 families

and the children were assessed at young age levels beginning with age 3 and ending at age 7. Additional studies have revealed similar findings, that child behavior problems are the result of child-rearing disagreements more so than global marital distress or adjustment (Jouriles, et al., 1991; Snyder, et al., 1988). However, while all of these studies are important and have made advances in this area of research, many are limited by small and unrepresentative samples. In addition, those studies with larger samples did not have data that compared the effects of child-centered conflict with other types of conflict, such as household chores and financial matters. This study addresses these limitations by using a large, nationally representative data set, which contains measures of child related and non-child related conflict. In addition this study utilizes a longitudinal design, whereas most studies have only obtained concurrent measures of conflict and behavior problems.

Most research suggests that children experience heightened emotional strain and maladjustment from exposure to child-centered conflict. However it is also possible that parental disagreement about child rearing may be associated with behavior problems in children because it affects parenting practices. It may be that the effect of child-centered conflict is indirect, operating through the effect it has on parent-child relationships.

### **Parent-Child Relationships**

Interparental conflict is also likely to have an impact on parent-child relationships which in turn affects child outcomes. Interparental conflict is seen as a stressor that either leaves spouses distracted or depletes the parent of emotional resources needed to be effective parents (Osborne & Fincham, 1996; Cummings & Wilson, 1999). Marital conflict diverts parents' attention away from the child and toward their own marriage. Jenkins and Smith (1991) found in their study that as parental conflict increased, children experienced less parental care and monitoring, and higher levels of physical aggression directed towards them. These authors go on to state that factors such as the lack of care and monitoring along with physical aggression are known to be associated with an increased risk of behavioral problems.

Harrist and Ainslie (1998) state several factors that may affect the parent-child relationship. Parents in maritally discordant relationships engage in such practices as poor communication, frequent expressions of anger, infrequent displays of affection, inconsistent use of discipline, and/or general disengagement (1998). The content of marital conflict, specifically disagreements on child rearing is one factor that may explain behavioral problems in children. If parents do not agree on child rearing issues they are less likely to be consistent in handling children. Family therapists stress the importance of parents agreeing on issues related to children so that children do not get caught up in the parental conflict (Haley, 1976).

Osborne and Fincham (1996) find that perceptions of interparental conflict were significantly associated with perceptions of more negative parent-child relationships, which in turn were associated with child adjustment problems. In their analysis of marital conflict and child adjustment, Grych and Fincham (1990) explain how the parent-child relationship can begin to deteriorate when parents become withdrawn or hostile toward their children. Additionally, frequently occurring conflict may lead to poor parent-child relationships as children become more aware and possibly more involved in their parent's conflict.

In terms of emotional adjustment, Davies and Cummings (1994) suggest that children's emotional security is derived from the quality of the marital relationship. Marital conflict can cause family life to be emotionally unpleasant, threaten the child's emotional well-being, result in a breakdown of discipline practices, and limit the extent to which parents are there for their children emotionally as well as limiting the sensitivity of parents. Children who perceive their parents engaging in angry, conflictual behavior may feel less secure in their own relationship with those parents.

Clearly, marital conflict can have detrimental effects on child outcomes, but the mechanisms by which marital conflicts influence children are relatively unexamined. However the question remains, in what way(s) does marital conflict influence children? This study aims to understand the association between the content of marital conflict and child outcomes. In addition this study seeks to dissect the mediating effects of the parent-

child relationship in terms of how these various dimensions of conflict affect this relationship and how a deterioration of this relationship can influence child outcomes.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

*Symbolic Interactionism.* Symbolic interactionism is a social psychological perspective that is relevant to the family, parenthood, and the overall socialization of children. This perspective understands human beings through a focus on interaction, rather than on personality or society. It emphasizes that human beings define their environment rather than simply respond to it, that a focus on interaction and definition focuses our attention on the present situation as the cause of what we do (Charon, 1998).

Because they emphasize the influence of present situations, symbolic interactionist views differ from many other perspectives in what is important in the socialization of children. While most other perspectives assume the stability in traits from childhood to adulthood, symbolic interactionism sees a more fluid individual that changes through communicating, role taking and problem solving. The symbolic interactionist view in contrast looks at the human being as active in his or her environment, an ever-changing actor, communicating, role taking, and problem solving along a stream of action (Charon, 1998). What we value at one point will be different from what we value at another point and how we act is constantly being altered by how we interpret other people's actions and their reactions to our own behavior.

In this sense parenting plays an important role. The directions that individuals take are in part due to the interactions they have with others and the decisions they make. Parents play the role of significant others to their children through interaction and their perspectives will be used by the children to define their world and influence their direction. What parents do in their lives that children can observe, what they intentionally and unintentionally communicate to them, the words they use to describe them, and the identities they give them all influence the direction the children take in life.

Conflict between parents affects the children as they learn ways to react to the conflict and try to interpret what it means for them. Children interpret the interaction that takes place between parents and this is what they use to define their world. Cummings, Simpson and Wilson (1993) suggest that children do not just react to the presence of conflict, but assess the overall meaning and message of how adults feel toward each other and how well they are getting along. Children engage in an appraisal that continues after the argument has ended, which includes an accounting of the end result of the interaction, even if some information comes later. This is consistent with interactionist claims that individuals, in this case children, are constantly redefining their environment, the interactions that take place, and the implications of that interaction.

Children use and interpret the interaction to create and maintain impressions of themselves, to forge a sense of self, and to create and sustain what they experience as the reality of a particular situation. Specifically, the symbolic interactionist perspective

suggests that if parents have disagreements about the child, that child will internalize this type of conflict, feeling that they are responsible for the parents' conflict. Fincham, Grych and Osborne (1994) support this position and suggest that because children actively interpret and respond to their environment, there is a need to better understand their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to the conflict in order to link marital conflict to child outcomes. Davies and Cummings (1994) suggest that children's emotional well-being in the face of marital conflict reflects the appraisal the child makes of the implications of the conflict for herself and for the family, and not just the fact of fighting or the fact that unpleasant emotions are expressed. Attributions of cause and blame for marital conflict are held to be important in shaping children's understanding and response to it (Grych & Fincham, 1993). Children may feel that conflict about them reflects their inadequacies. Such child-centered conflict can lead to distant parenting and the child may further come to define him or herself as unacceptable to his or her parents.

## CHAPTER 2

### DATA AND METHODS

This research study used data collected by the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). The NSFH is a nationally representative, longitudinal two-wave panel study of respondents age eighteen and over. It includes interviews that were conducted in 1987-1988 for Wave I and 1992-1994 for Wave II. Over 10,000 respondents completed both waves and are included in this study. A subsample of respondents married and with children at Wave I was used in the present study.

Specifically, this study explored the relationship between marital conflict at Wave I and child outcomes at Wave II. Respondents were asked questions about their marital status, their relationship with their husband or wife, and their child/children's well-being and performance in school. Using these measures, this study examined the frequency, intensity, and content of marital conflict at time I and how these related to child outcomes at time II. In addition, the relationship between marital conflict and the parent-child relationship was examined to explore the mechanisms by which conflict affects child outcomes.

Independent variables: Respondents are asked (in the first wave) a series of questions about how they handle conflict with their spouses. To determine the frequency of the conflict, questions were used that address when married couples have serious disagreements how often do they argue heatedly or shout at each other. Responses are arranged on a scale from one to five (1=never and 5=always).

The second dimension of conflict, intensity, was addressed using questions that ask how often respondents end up hitting or throwing things at each other (where 2=seldom, 3=sometimes, 4=very often, & 5=always), in addition to one that asks during the last year have arguments between couples become physical (1=yes and 2=no). Intensity will therefore be operationalized according to the degree to which physical aggression is present. The high intensity conflict group included the following responses: how often respondents hit or throw that include sometimes, very often, or always and if they answer “yes” to arguments becoming physical. Low intensity conflict constituted all other married couples, or those whose response was they never or seldom hit or throw things and whose arguments never become physical.

To determine the content of the conflict, the third dimension, questions were used that addressed areas of disagreement with their partner that, again, included such topics as household chores, financial matters, and child rearing beliefs. Specifically, the survey presents a list of topics which couples often have disagreements and asks respondents how often in the last year they had an open disagreement about household tasks, money,

spending time together, sex, in-laws, and the children. Possible responses range from one to six, where 1=never, 2=less than once a month...5=several times a week, 6=almost every day. In this analysis, I examined the effects of child conflict in general and relative to other types of conflict.

Dependent variables: In the second wave respondents are asked questions about a focal child, a child randomly selected at Wave I. In Wave II this child is between the ages of 5 and 17. These questions were used to measure the child's well-being. Specific questions included whether the focal child has sudden changes in mood or feeling, is too fearful and anxious, is unhappy, sad, or depressed, if the focal child is withdrawn and does not get involved with others, if the child has difficulty concentrating and cannot pay attention for long, is disobedient at home, is high strung, tense, and nervous, and if he or she argues too much. Possible responses to these questions are 1=not true, 2=sometimes true, and 3=often true. These behavior problems were examined separately. In addition, they were summed together in a separate analysis and used as an overall measure of behavior problems. Factor analyses supported the creation of a single measure from all eight of these outcome measures (eigenvalue=3.136).

Also in the second wave, respondents are asked questions about parenting. These questions are whether in the last week the respondent spent time with the focal child, just the two of them working on homework or a project, leisure activities, or just having private talks. The possible responses were either yes/no. A second question that was

used was whether or not in the last week the respondent gave the child a hug or kiss to express their affection with the possible answer as either yes or no (where 1=yes and 2=no). These questions were used to understand the effect of marital conflict on parent-child relationships and the association of these relationship measures with child outcomes.

Control Variables: Respondents are also asked (in the first wave) a series of general questions about the relationship with their husband or wife. On a scale from one to seven, respondents are asked how happy they are with their relationship overall (1=very unhappy and 7=very happy). Responses to these questions were used as a measure of global marital satisfaction. Other control variables used in the present study include the respondent's age, education, household income, marital history, and whether any child was difficult to raise. The last measure was included in an effort to control for preexisting behavior problems in children.

### **Research Purpose and Hypotheses**

The purpose of the present study is to contribute further data on associations between the content of marital conflict and negative child outcomes as well as how such conflict can influence parent-child relationships. This study will test the following hypotheses:

1. Marital relationships characterized by child-related conflict are associated with more behavior problems in children compared to conflict over household chores, financial matters, sex, in-laws, and the amount of time spouses spend with one another.
2. Marital relationships with frequent conflict are associated with behavior problems in children.
3. Marital relationships with intense conflict are associated with behavior problems in children.
4. Parent-child relationships act as a mediator between the effects of marital conflict on child outcomes.

## CHAPTER 3

### FINDINGS

#### Sample Characteristics/Univariate Analyses

The NSFH sample was limited to married respondents with children in Wave I and where a follow-up of the child at Wave II was possible (N=1,966). The mean age of the respondents was 32. In terms of marital history, slightly over three-fourths reported being married only once. The average level of education was 13 years indicating respondents had a high school level education and some college. The average income was \$40,700. In terms of conflict, 42% of respondents indicated they argue heatedly or shout at each other and 10% of respondent's report that they hit or throw things during arguments (high intensity). Regarding the content of disagreements, 27% of respondents argue about the children, 29% argue about spending time together, 19% argue about sex, 13% argue about in-laws, 30% argue about money, and 27% argue about household chores (see Table 1). Additionally, 16% of the respondents indicated that they argue about the child and nothing else.

Table 1  
(see Appendix)

### **Bivariate Analyses**

To test my hypotheses, bivariate analyses were run first to determine whether relationships exist between the variables of interest. To test the first hypothesis, that conflict over children is related to child outcomes, I ran Pearson correlations to observe the relationships between child conflict and all eight child outcome measures. Results revealed child conflict to be significantly associated with all child outcomes ( $p < .05$ ). The presence of child centered conflict is associated with increased behavior problems regardless of the type of behavior problem (see Table 2). Initial expectations were that child centered conflict would be related to child outcomes whereas other types of conflict were not. However, the bivariate tests reveal that all types of conflict are positively related to child behavior problems. These bivariate analyses do not provide sufficient evidence that child related conflict is any more or less damaging to children than other types of conflict. In the next section multivariate analyses will be conducted that allows for a comparison of the effects of the different types of conflict on children.

The other types of conflict, specifically conflict about money, chores, and time were also significantly associated with all child outcomes. Conflict over in-laws was significantly associated with seven of the outcome measures which included sudden changes in mood or feeling, is too fearful or anxious, has difficulty concentrating and cannot pay attention for long, is disobedient at home, is high strung, tense, and nervous, is unhappy, sad, or depressed, and is withdrawn and does not get involved with others

(see Table 2). Conflict over sex was significantly associated with only six of the eight outcome measures. These behaviors included is too fearful or anxious, argues too much, has difficulty concentrating and cannot pay attention for long, is rather high strung, tense and nervous, is unhappy, sad, or depressed, and is withdrawn and does not get involved with others.

#### Table 2

Hypothesis 2 predicted that marital relationships characterized by frequent conflict are associated with behavior problems in children. Using a Pearson correlation, a statistically significant, positive relationship exists between the frequency of conflict and all eight of the behavioral outcome measures (see Table 3). Frequent conflict is associated with increased behavior problems regardless of the type of behavior problem.

#### Table 3

Hypothesis 3 stated that marital relationships with intense conflict are associated with behavior problems in children. Results from t-tests reveal statistically significant relationships between intense conflict and five of the eight outcome measures (see Table 4). Behavioral problems associated with intensity include sudden changes in mood or feeling, difficulty concentrating and cannot pay attention for long, is disobedient at home, is unhappy, sad or depressed, and is withdrawn and does not get involved with others.

#### Table 4

The fourth and final hypothesis predicted that parent-child relationships act as a mediator between the effects of marital conflict on child outcomes. To explore this hypothesis, bivariate tests were first run to determine whether types of conflict are associated with parent-child relationships and then whether parent-child relationships are associated with child outcomes. Results from t-tests reveal that conflict over the child, conflict over the time spouses spend with one another, and conflict over sex were the only areas of disagreement that were significantly related to parent-child relationships (see Table 5). These types of conflict were associated with a reduction in whether or not in the past month the respondent spent time alone with the focal child doing homework, working on a project, or just having private talks. Behavior problems that were associated with this parent-child relationship measure include sudden changes in mood or feeling, argues too much, has difficulty concentrating and cannot pay attention for long, and is unhappy, sad, or depressed (see Table 6). These preliminary results offer some support that parent-child relationships may mediate the effect of conflict on child outcomes, but only for some types of conflict such as the child, sex, and time spent together. To further explore this hypothesis and test for true mediating effects, the parent-child relationship will be included in regression analyses in the next section.

Table 5 and 6

### **Multivariate Analyses**

While bivariate relationships reveal associations, it is possible that these relationships could be spurious. Thus, multivariate analyses (OLS regressions) were run to determine whether child centered conflict has an effect on child outcomes when controlling for other dimensions of conflict (i.e. frequency and intensity) and background characteristics. In addition, regression analyses allow for a comparison of the effects of child conflict relative to other types of conflict to adequately address the central hypothesis of this thesis.

The independent variables used in the regression model include the six areas of disagreement, frequency, and intensity. The control variables in the model include a measure of global marital satisfaction, income, age, education, and a question whether any child of the respondent was particularly difficult to raise (measured at time 1). Regressions are conducted separately for each of the eight outcome measures and the overall scale of behavioral outcomes. A final overall model examines the effects of the independent variables. Controls like parent-child relationship measures are also included.

#### Table 7

With regard to the first hypothesis, regression analyses of all eight of the behavioral outcomes individually revealed that child-related conflict was statistically significant with three of the outcomes, which included argues too much, is disobedient at

home, and is high strung, tense, and nervous (see Table 7). Child centered conflict is associated with an increase in these behavioral problems.

Additionally, conflict over money was statistically significant with one outcome of the child having difficulty concentrating and cannot pay attention for long. Conflict over time was associated with sudden changes in mood or feeling. Also worth mentioning is a negative relationship that was found between conflict over sex and child outcomes. Conflict over sex was associated with the child being less moody and less disobedient at home than those whose parents who don't argue about sex.

In additional analyses, all behavioral outcome measures were grouped together into a single variable. This summary outcome measure was included in a regression model with all independent and control variables. A statistically significant relationship was found between conflict about the child and behavior problems (see Table 8). Thus the regression analysis using a summary measure of child outcomes confirms the salience of this type of conflict which was associated with a significant increase in child behavior problems. However, as results in Table 8 indicate, conflict over sex was also statistically significant, but this relationship was negative indicating that those parents who argue about sex have kids with fewer behavior problems than those who don't argue about sex.

Regarding the second and third hypotheses, although significant relationships were found between the frequency and intensity of arguments and child outcomes in the

bivariate tests, results varied when including these variables in the regression analyses.

No significant relationships were found between the frequency of arguments and individual child outcomes or the summary outcome measure. The intensity of arguments was also not found to be significantly associated with the overall summary measure, but was found to be significantly associated with two individual behaviors which included the child being withdrawn and does not get involved with others and being disobedient at home (see Table 7).

As a final test of the fourth hypothesis, to see if parent-child relationships mediate the effects of marital conflict on child outcomes, the two parent-child relationship variables were included in the regression model. One of these questions which asked if during the past week the parent gave the focal child a hug or kiss to express affection, was statistically significant with the summary measure of behavior problems in children (see Table 8). As seen in Table 8, one regression analysis was run against the summary behavior measure without the parent-child relationship variables and another analysis included these variables. Including the parent-child relationship variables in the model eliminated conflict over the child. From these results, it appears that an affectionate parent-child relationship does play a role in the effect that this type of conflict has on the behavior problems of children. Conflict over sex was also eliminated when these parent-child relationship variables were included in the model, however, this relationship was

originally negative. Interestingly, after the inclusion of the affectionate parent-child relationship measure another type of conflict, conflict over chores, was significant.

#### Table 8

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSIONS

#### **Discussion of Findings**

The primary focus of this research was to test whether marital conflict, specifically child-related conflict, was a stronger predictor of behavior problems in children compared to conflict over other areas of disagreement including chores, money, sex, in-laws, and the time spouses spend with one another. It was believed and supported in the literature that conflict concerning the child may be more disturbing to the child and thus be more closely related to behavior problems (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Bivariate analyses revealed an association between child related conflict on all outcome measures. Multivariate regression analyses confirmed these preliminary associations that child centered conflict was significantly related to the most outcome measures. Results from the present study revealed a relationship between child-related conflict and argues too much, is disobedient at home, and is high strung, tense and nervous as behavioral outcomes. These findings support the conclusions from the Grych & Fincham study in that as conflict about the child draws him or her into the argument, the child may feel the need to resolve the conflict. Consequently, as the child becomes more involved in the

parent's conflict, parents could perceive the child's involvement as being argumentative or talking back. Also, as conflict about the child increases, possibly due to differences in how to raise or discipline the child, inconsistent discipline could result, thus explaining why the child is disobedient. This finding supports the central hypothesis of this study that child centered conflict is related to behavior problems in children.

The symbolic interactionist theory is applicable and appropriate in explaining the findings of this study. It is possible that children internalize parental conflict which in turn may affect their sense of self. Although two of the behaviors associated with conflict over the child were externalizing (i.e. argues and is disobedient) it is possible that they are still internalizing the conflict and interpreting it as harmful, otherwise they would not be reacting to it. When parents fight about the child, the child could feel like they did something wrong or their parents are dissatisfied with them. In terms of symbolic interactionism, children could feel at fault for the conflict that they caused it, and may feel they lack their parent's approval. Additionally, parents could have disagreements about the child, however, they may not be directly related to something specific the child did, but rather the parents could just have differences of opinion about how to raise them. In this case, the child may not receive explanations from the parents that absolve them from blame and consequently the child may have feelings of fear, responsibility, and guilt. The other types of disagreement, conflict over money and time spent together were associated with internalizing behaviors of the child having difficulty

concentrating and being moody. Again, it appears that children may still internalize this type of conflict, however more research is needed that specifically addresses various types of conflict and the ways in which children react to them.

It is important to give consideration to and offer possible explanations for the inverse relationship that was found between conflict over sex and child outcomes in the summary model. The idea that parents who argue about sex have children with less behavior problems could reflect the nature of this type of conflict. Although the exact age of the child is unknown, it might be that younger children have little or no understanding about sex and therefore do not perceive it as a stressor. They could pay less attention to disagreements that revolve around this issue. Overinvolvement of one parent with the child could also help explain why fewer behavior problems exist in children whose parents argue about sex. Spouses seek an emotional connection with one another and when this need is not met, the parents' attention could be diverted to focus on the child. A parent-child relationship measure of the amount of time parents spend with their child talking, working on homework, etc. was not available to indicate how much the parents are invested in the relationship with their child. With no previous research available that compares various types of conflict it is difficult to explain this finding. Additional research is needed to confirm this finding and offer possible explanations as to why it exists.

I hypothesized that parent-child relationships serve to mediate the effects of child related conflict on behavior problems. Multivariate analyses confirmed preliminary findings of this assertion. Parent-child relationships, specifically affectionate ones, do appear to serve as a mediating factor for this type of conflict. Thus, even though parents may argue about the child, as long as they continue to express affection toward the child, this could be reassurance that they still love him or her.

However, also needing an explanation is why a significant relationship would appear with conflict over chores and behavior outcomes only after including the affectionate parent-child relationship measure in the overall summary regression model. A possible explanation for this finding could be a reflection of the nature of this type of conflict. Household chores are an everyday issue and so it could be that children understand arguments of this type more so than complex issues such as money. It is possible that children still internalize this type of conflict feeling that they are not doing enough to help out around the house.

An additional explanation could be due to a “spill over effect”. This “spill over” hypothesis has been addressed several times in the literature indicating that as parents have anger toward one another because of the conflict, their anger could “spill over” into the parent-child relationship (Cummings and Wilson, 1999). As parents argue about chores and become less affectionate with one another they could also begin to be less affectionate toward the child. As parents withdraw from the child as the conflict

increases, the child could interpret this as a rejection of them which could lead to behavior problems. Thus, the child may then interpret this type of conflict as something potentially harmful for them.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although this study provides interesting findings regarding the content of marital conflict and behavioral problems in children, it also has several limitations. In using the NSFH all questions were asked of adult respondents, in this case, married couples that have children. All questions about the behavior problems of the children were reports as perceived by the parents. The researchers conducting the survey did not witness any of the actual behaviors of the children. Along these same lines, reports of problematic behaviors in children were not asked of teachers or day care providers which in some cases could provide additional insight into the behaviors of children in a different environment.

A second limitation of the study is that even though the researcher tried to control for as many variables as possible, other variables such as conflict among other family members or other family dynamics could play a role. As a result, behavior problems in children, as noted in this study, might not be a result of the interparental conflict but of some other unexamined factor.

Additionally, a third limitation is that it is unknown whether children witness the conflict that reportedly occurs. Witnessing the actual conflict may result in children's maladjustment more so than simply the occurrence of the conflict. Children who witness the conflict could develop unhealthy coping strategies in that they could act out to distract attention from the marital conflict or they could withdraw when their parents fight. The interpretation of the findings from this study might be different if it was known what the children witness and of how much of the conflict they are aware.

A fourth limitation is that the effect of conflict is not seen on adolescents because they are not included in the second wave. All of the behavior outcomes were in reference to a focal child between the ages of 5 and 17 during the first wave. However, because of the five year span between the waves, those children who were adolescents at the time of Wave I would have "aged out" and not been included at Wave II. Therefore the sample in this study was reduced to those respondents married with children at Time I where follow-up at Time II was possible. As a result, the effects of conflict as noted in this study are only reflective of children and pre-adolescents.

Finally, a fifth limitation is that it is unknown which parent completed the survey. It is possible that husbands could underestimate the occurrence of the type of conflict and it is possible that wives could overestimate the extent to which certain types of conflict are present or problematic.

### **Contribution**

Much of the literature in this field has focused on the frequency and intensity of conflict. Less attention has been paid to the relationships between the content of conflict and child outcomes. In the small body of work available, it has been suggested that the type of disagreement is important particularly if it is about the child. The results of this study indicate that conflict over children is related to child outcomes and that an affectionate parent-child relationship acts as a mediator between this type of conflict and child outcomes. This study offers insight into this relatively unexplored area by using a dataset that is large, nationally representative, longitudinal, and which allows for comparison of types of conflict and controls for frequency, intensity of conflict, preexisting behavior problems and other important background variables. The results of this thesis suggest that the type of conflict does matter and has an impact on child outcomes.

### **Recommendations of Further Research**

This study makes it clear that marital conflict, specifically conflict that is child-related, is correlated with behavioral problems in children. Although the content of conflict and how it relates to child outcomes is relatively underdeveloped, it is still necessary to explore other topical areas of conflict in order to better understand which

types of conflict are related to child outcomes and to identify the mechanisms by which they affect children.

In addition the content of marital conflict could relate differently to children of different ages. This study did not explore differences in children's response to conflict at various levels of cognitive and social development. Information about how children of different ages think about the conflict and family relationships could aid in intervention efforts to minimize the effects of child-related conflict on child outcomes. Similarly, in exploring a child's age and how they respond to conflict, it also worth exploring how children interpret interparental conflict and their perceptions of it which are also likely to influence children's responses. Given that some degree of conflict exists in most marriages, it might be children's interpretations of the conflict that determines whether it is harmful to them rather than actual interparental conflict. While the present study was a longitudinal design and provided insight on how conflict affects children over time, it would be of interest to interview the children as opposed to parents to see the effects of continued exposure to conflict and children's adjustment.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Descriptives on Study Variables (N=1,966)

	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
<b>Independent Variables - Wave 1</b>			
Children	2.17	1.22	1966
Sex	1.86	1.16	1949
Time Together	2.19	1.27	1961
Household Chores	2.21	1.06	1969
Money	2.28	1.16	1968
In-laws	1.65	.95	1963
Frequency	2.15	.93	1965
Intensity	.10	.30	1894
<b>Outcome Measures (Scale 1-3) (Child Age 5-17 at Wave II)</b>			
Moody	1.75	.62	1966
Fearful	1.39	.56	1964
Argues	1.75	.68	1964
Difficulty Concentrating	1.50	.66	1968
Disobedient at Home	1.56	.57	1965
Tense	1.44	.64	1965
Depressed	1.29	.49	1956
Withdrawn	1.17	.42	1953
<b>Parent-Child Relationship</b>			
Time Spent with Child	1.10	.30	1966
Affectionate toward Child	1.09	.29	1504
<b>Summary Outcome Measure (Scale 8-24)</b>	<b>11.85</b>	<b>2.85</b>	<b>1936</b>
<b>Control Variables</b>			
Age	32.00	6.85	1966
Income	40,700	39,640	1729
Education	13.00	2.56	1963
Marital Satisfaction (1-7)	5.84	1.33	1916
Marital History (1-5)	1.23	.49	1966
Child Difficult to Raise (1-2)	1.87	.33	1198
<b>Measure of Multiple Conflicts (Scale 0-5)</b>	<b>1.9118</b>	<b>1.3182</b>	<b>1781</b>

Table 2 Pearson Correlations of the Relationship Between Types of Conflict and Child Outcomes. (N=1,966)

Type of Conflict	Moody	Fearful	Argues	Difficulty Concentrating	Disobedient at home	Tense	Depressed	Withdrawn
Children	.077***	.053*	.134***	.096***	.115***	.121***	.078***	.082***
Sex	.031	.058**	.045*	.094***	.037	.066**	.072**	.076***
Time Together	.103***	.052*	.081***	.106***	.061**	.086***	.101***	.081***
Household Chores	.097***	.057*	.077***	.100***	.093***	.099***	.084***	.065**
Money	.102***	.047*	.073***	.131***	.095***	.100***	.089***	.063**
In-laws	.074***	.050*	.023	.088***	.051*	.090***	.064**	.095***

\*\*\*P<=.001

\*\*P<=.01

\*P<=.05

Table 3. Pearson Correlations of the Relationship Between Frequency of Conflict and Child Outcomes. (N=1,966)

	Moody	Fearful	Argues	Difficulty Concentrating	Disobedient at home	Tense	Depressed	Withdrawn
Frequency	0.082***	0.055*	0.084***	0.057*	0.094***	0.06**	0.084***	0.046*

\*\*\*P<=.001

\*\*P<=.01

\*P<=.05

Table 4 Bivariate Test. Intensity of Conflict and Behavioral Problems. (N=1,966)

	Mean Scores on Behavior Problems (Scale 1-3)															
	Moody		Fearful		Argues		Difficulty Concentrating		Disobedient at home		Tense		Depressed		Withdrawn	
	Mean	t	Mean	t	Mean	t	Mean	t	Mean	t	Mean	t	Mean	t	Mean	t
Intensity																
High	1.86	2.623**	1.46	1.577	1.77	.478	1.66	3.409***	1.64	2.203*	1.47	.786	1.39	2.801**	1.26	3.156**
Low	1.73		1.39		1.75		1.49		1.55		1.44		1.29		1.16	

\*\*\*P<=.001

\*\*P<=.01

\*P<=.05

Table 5. Bivariate Test. Types of Conflict and Parent-Child Relationships. (N=1,966)

	Types of Conflict											
	Children		Sex		Time Together		Chores		Money		In-laws	
	Mean	t	Mean	t	Mean	t	Mean	t	Mean	t	Mean	t
Parent-Child Relationship												
Time Spent w/ Child												
Yes	2.11	-2.782*	1.84	-2.379*	2.15	2.375*	2.20	-.204	2.27	.073	1.66	1.340
No	2.40		2.09		2.42		2.22		2.26		1.54	
Affectionate w/ Child												
Yes	2.14	-.454	1.88	1.851	2.17	-.317	2.22	1.212	2.27	.360	1.66	1.396
No	2.18		1.69		2.21		2.10		2.23		1.54	

\*\*\*P<=.001

\*\*P<=.01

\*P<=.05

Table 6. Bivariate Test Parent-Child Relationships and Behavioral Problems. (N=1,966)

	Mean Scores on Behavior Problems (Scale 1-3)															
	Moody		Fearful		Argues		Difficulty Concentrating		Disobedient at home		Tense		Depressed		Withdrawn	
	Mean	t	Mean	t	Mean	t	Mean	t	Mean	t	Mean	t	Mean	t	Mean	t
Parent-Child Relationship																
Time Spent w/ Child																
Yes	1.73	-2.071*	1.37	-1.811	1.74	-2.255*	1.47	-2.342*	1.56	-.504	1.43	-1.398	1.27	-2.360*	1.16	-.975
No	1.84		1.46		1.88		1.60		1.59		1.50		1.37		1.20	
Affectionate w/ Child																
Yes	1.73	-1.655	1.38	-.788	1.75	-.779	1.48	-.746	1.57	.501	1.42	-1.875	1.27	-2.623	1.15	-3.144
No	1.82		1.42		1.80		1.52		1.54		1.53		1.39		1.27	

\*\*\*P<=.001

\*\*P<=.01

\*P<=.05

Table 7. OLS Regression Analyses. Individual Behavioral Outcomes with Dimensions of Conflict as Predictors. (N=1,966)

	Behavior Problems							
	Moody	Fearful	Argues	Difficulty Concentrating	Disobedient at home	Tense	Depressed	Withdrawn
	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)
Conflict Types								
Children	0.101 (0.058)	4.598E-02 (.050)	.151** (.065)	9.653E-02 (.063)	6.064E-02 (.052)	5.241E-02 (.059)	2.393E-03 (.047)	-2.601E-02 (.041)
Sex	-0.206*** (.060)	-6.323E-02 (.052)	-.100 (.067)	-4.517E-02 (.065)	-9.319E-02 (.054)	-9.458E-02 (.061)	-8.006E-02 (.049)	-2.636E-02 (.042)
Time Together	.171*** (.054)	.132** (.046)	9.633E-02 (.060)	6.866E-02 (.058)	5.870E-02 (.048)	.141** (.054)	.110* (.044)	2.368E-02 (.038)
Chores	-5.876E-02 (.065)	2.796E-02 (.056)	-5.999E-02 (.073)	-3.665E-02 (.070)	4.745E-03 (.058)	3.055E-02 (.066)	8.668E-02 (.053)	5.832E-02 (.046)
Money	4.945E-02 (.053)	-3.613E-02 (.046)	2.958E-02 (.060)	.176** (.058)	1.647E-02 (.048)	5.000E-03 (.054)	3.366E-02 (.044)	-1.551E-02 (.038)
In-Laws	8.591E-02 (.119)	9.024E-02 (.103)	-9.920E-02 (.134)	-.125 (.130)	-.111 (.107)	8.035E-02 (.121)	-8.468E-02 (.097)	-3.678E-02 (.083)
Frequency	2.459E-02 (.025)	1.570E-02 (.022)	3.952E-02 (.028)	-1.598E-02 (.027)	3.553E-02 (.023)	1.333E-02 (.026)	1.710E-02 (.020)	2.097E-02 (.018)
Intensity	-2.385E-02 (.075)	-5.689E-02 (.065)	-1.566E-02 (.084)	3.304E-02 (.081)	.128 (.068)	-2.521E-02 (.076)	6.118E-02 (.061)	.120* (.053)
Control Variables								
Age	-7.089E-03* (.003)	-6.377E-03* (.003)	-1.175E-02** (.004)	-5.358E-03 (.004)	-9.702E-03*** (.003)	-4.504E-03 (.003)	-4.545E-03 (.003)	2.009E-03 (.002)
Income	-2.175E-07 (.000)	-5.301E-07 (.000)	6.317E-07 (.000)	-1.223E-06 (.000)	-5.241E-07 (.000)	-2.480E-07 (.000)	-3.350E-07 (.000)	-8.282E-07* (-.000)
Education	-7.769E-03 (.008)	-2.144E-02** (.007)	-4.087E-04 (.010)	-4.717E-03 (.009)	1.163E-02 (.008)	-3.328E-03 (.009)	4.552E-03 (.007)	1.175E-03 (.006)
Marital Satisfaction	-2.773E-02 (.016)	-9.766E-05 (.014)	-1.167E-02 (.018)	-1.243E-02 (.017)	-2.011E-02 (.014)	-4.517E-03 (.016)	-1.293E-02 (.013)	-3.834E-03 (.011)
Marital History	4.087E-02 (.039)	8.363E-02* (.033)	.122** (.043)	4.756E-02 (.042)	5.024E-02 (.035)	9.625E-02* (.039)	5.903E-02 (.031)	2.089E-02 (.027)
Child Not Difficult to Raise	-8.239E-02 (.061)	-4.435E-02 (.053)	-.153* (.069)	-7.326E-02 (.066)	-.220*** (.055)	-.130* (.062)	-8.442E-02 (.050)	-.104* (.043)

\*\*\*P&lt;= .001

\*\*P&lt;= .01

\*P&lt;= .05

Table 8. OLS Regression Analyses. Summary Behavioral Outcome Measure with Dimensions of Conflict as Predictors

	(A) Without P/C Relationship				(B) With P/C Relationship			
	b	Std Error	Beta	Sig	b	Std. Error	Beta	Sig
<b>Types of Conflict</b>								
Children	.179	.091	.074	*	.200	.106	.082	
Sex	-.205	.102	-.078	*	-.107	.116	-.042	
Time Together	.188	.099	.078		.141	.113	.060	
Household Chores	.172	.114	.060		.288	.130	.103	*
Money	2.49E-02	.111	.009		-9.91E-02	.127	-.038	
In-laws	.116	.113	.036		1.51E-01	.133	.046	
<b>Frequency</b>								
	.149	.120	.046		.177	.135	.057	
<b>Intensity</b>								
	.220	.352	.021		7.59E-03	.411	.001	
<b>Control Variables</b>								
Age	-4.38E-02	.016	-.095	**	-3.50E-02	.018	-.078	
Income	-3.91E-06	.000	-.051		-4.93E-06	.000	-.058	
Education	-1.59E-02	.040	-.014		-4.31E-02	.049	-.036	
Marital Satisfaction	-.107	.074	-.050		-5.79E-02	.085	-.028	
Marital History	.540	.178	.099	**	0.406	.205	.076	*
Child Difficult to Raise	-.831	.282	-.098	**	-.288	.322	-.035	
<b>Parent-Child Relationship</b>								
Lack of Time Spent w/Child	-	-	-	-	-.698	.441	-.059	
Lack of Affection toward Child	-	-	-	-	.768	.312	.093	*
***P<=.001 **P<=.01 *P<=.05								
<b>N</b>								
		1966			1966			
<b>R Squared</b>								
		0.082			0.079			

## VITA

Teresa Wilson Morales was born in Decatur, Indiana, on July 17, 1976, the daughter of Janice May Wilson and Ruben David Wilson. After graduating from San Marcos High School, San Marcos, Texas in 1994, she entered Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos. She graduated Cum Laude and received a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from SWT in December 1998. In August 1999 she entered the Graduate School, Sociology Program, of Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos. While working on her degree, she was employed full-time with the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs in Austin, Texas, and worked part-time as a graduate research assistant for two years.

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