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The Impact of Marital Withdrawal and Secure Base Script Knowledge on Mothers' and Fathers' Parenting

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Abstract

The current study examines associations between marital conflict and negative parenting behaviors among fathers and mothers, and the extent to which internal working models of attachment relationships may serve as sources of risk or resilience during family interactions. The sample consisted of 115 families (mothers, fathers, and their six-month-old infants) who participated in a controlled experiment. Couples were randomly assigned to engage in either a conflict or positive marital discussion, followed by parent-infant freeplay sessions and assessment of parental internal working models of attachment (i.e., secure base script knowledge). While no differences in parenting behaviors emerged between the conflict and positive groups, findings revealed that couple withdrawal during the marital discussion was related to more intrusive and emotionally disengaged parenting for mothers and fathers. Interestingly, secure base script knowledge was inversely related to intrusion and emotional disengagement for fathers, but not for mothers. Furthermore, only among fathers did secure base script knowledge serve to significantly buffer the impact of marital disengagement on negative parenting (emotional disengagement). Findings are discussed using a family systems framework and expand our understanding of families, and family members, at risk.

Keywords

parenting; marital conflict; secure base scripts; mothers; fathers

Marital conflict is widely recognized as a significant public health problem due to its implications for child development (e.g., Cummings & Davies, 2010). Damage to the parent-child relationship and negative parenting behaviors are highlighted as key mechanisms facilitating child maladjustment (e.g., Coln, Jordan, & Mercer, 2013). Specifically, marital conflict is related to negative parent-child interactions, harsh parenting (e.g., Krishnakumar, & Buehler, 2000), and reduced sensitivity to child signals (e.g., Zhou, Cao, & Leerkes, 2017). Yet personal characteristics and experiences play an important role in shaping

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individual vulnerability to marital conflict and subsequent variations in parenting (e.g., Belsky, 1984; Jessee et al., 2010). Attachment theory suggests that early caregiving experiences are stored cognitively as an internal working model (IWM) that serves as the foundation for knowledge of (in)sensitive caregiving; the IWM aids both to guide one's own behaviors in close relationships and interpret the behaviors of others (Bowlby, 1969/1982; De Winter, Vandevivere, Waters, Braet, & Bosmans, 2016; Dykas & Cassidy, 2011). It is likely that the IWM impacts not only how individuals' parent their children, but also their interactions in romantic relationships (Simpson, Rholes, & Winterheld, 2010). Surprisingly, few empirical studies have examined the interplay of marital exchanges and IWMs on parenting behavior. In this study, we add to the literature identifying determinants of parenting by examining the combined contributions of marital conflict and existing vulnerabilities related to one's IWM, measured as the secure base script.

Marital Conflict and Parenting

Family systems theorists (e.g., Cox & Paley, 1997) have argued that the parent-child relationship is especially susceptible to influences from other family relations, including the marital subsystem (Elam, Chassin, Eisenberg, & Spinrad, 2017). Research supports the interdependence of family dyads, with both positive and negative marital interactions influencing parenting behavior (see Grych, 2002, for review). For example, heightened parental conflict has been shown to compromise caregiving (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000), leading to greater intrusiveness (Benson, Buehler, & Gerard, 2008) and emotional unavailability (Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006) among parents in conflictual relationships.

Disrupted parenting is a primary mechanism through which marital conflict leads to deleterious outcomes for child development (e.g., Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). Researchers suggest that parental conflict reduces the amount of time and energy parents invest in their children (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006), and increases insensitivity to children's cues (Levendosky, Leahy, Bogat, Davidson, & von Eye, 2006). Marital discord hence threatens a child's sense of family stability and cohesiveness (Cummings & Davies, 2010), resulting in emotional distress even in children as young as infants (Du Rocher Schudlich, White, Fleischhauer, & Fitzgerald, 2011). Shortly after the birth of a child, parenting stress and marital conflict tend to increase (Feinberg, 2002). Parents are adjusting to changing schedules and roles, and learning the cues of the developing child. Thus, explorations of marital conflict and parenting are particularly important during infancy, when discord is especially high and parenting resources may be strained by the demands of the dependent infant (e.g., Cox, Paley, Payne, & Burchinal, 1999).

Research on marital conflict has underscored the significance of both hostility and withdrawal as disruptive to the parent-child relationship (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). However, withdrawal seems to be especially troubling for marriages (Gottman, 1993) and parenting alike. Both mothers and fathers are less sensitive and more intrusive with their children following marital interactions in which they (Cox et al., 1999) or their partner (e.g., Klausli & Tresch Owen, 2011) withdraw. Emotional distance and avoidance prevents partners from resolving disagreements (Cox et al., 1999). Conflict resolution facilitates

positive parenting following spousal arguments (McCoy, Cummings, & Davies, 2009). This may explain why withdrawal has been linked to reduced parental sensitivity (Cox et al., 1999) and greater emotional detachment (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006) compared to hostile marital exchanges. However, differential effects of marital withdrawal on parenting processes have been reported, with more robust associations among fathers than mothers (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). This is not surprising given that fathers are more likely to withdraw during marital discussions (Christensen & Heavey, 1990).

Script-Like Attachment Representations and Family Relationships

Beyond parent gender, it is important to note that other personal and relational qualities may impact susceptibility to spillover from marital conflict to parenting practices. Specifically, through experiences in close relationships, individuals build mental models of attachment that include representations of the self and others (Bowlby, 1973). The quality of early experiences are internalized and incorporated within an internal working model to organize expectations for the availability and responsiveness of attachment figures (e.g., parents and romantic partners) and are used to guide and interpret social interactions. Importantly, Bowlby (1969/1982) suggested that such working models are a cornerstone of secure base relationships and are the key mechanism linking early caregiving experiences with later social-emotional outcomes.

Drawing from Bowlby and the work of Bretherton (1991), who proposed that script representations are the building blocks of the internal working model, researchers have suggested that attachment representations are stored and organized cognitively as a secure base script that can be assessed through narratives about attachment-related events (Waters, Rodrigues, & Ridgeway, 1998; Waters & Waters, 2006). Similar to any script (e.g., Nelson, 1986), the secure base script follows a temporal-causal structure that contains several key elements (Waters & Waters, 2006): (1) active engagement of the dyad (parent-child, romantic partners); (2) interruption of interaction by an obstacle; (3) a bid for help; (4) the caregiver/partner recognizes the bid and help is offered; (5) help is accepted and (6) effective in overcoming the problem, and (7) alleviating any distress or negative affect; and (8) the dyad returns to normal engagement. A developmental history of consistent and sensitive caregiving leads to complete, clear, and accessible secure base scripts that contain these elements (e.g., Steele et al., 2014; Vaughn et al., 2016; Waters, Ruiz, & Roisman, 2017). In contrast, when caregiving has been insensitive or inconsistent, individuals lack secure base script knowledge.

Access to the secure base script has been linked to high quality mother-child (Coppola et al., 2006; Hawkins, Madigan, Moran, & Pederson, 2015) and couple (Waters, Brockmeyer, & Crowell, 2013) relationships; when individuals internalize a clear “picture” of what secure base use and support look like based on their relationship histories, they are better able to provide secure base support to others. It should be noted that less is known about the role secure base scripts play in paternal-child interactions. In one known study assessing Portuguese fathers’ secure base script knowledge, the secure base script was significantly related to secure child-father attachment (Monteiro et al., 2008). While research with mothers has identified parenting behavior as the mechanism linking parental secure base

scripts to child security (Vaughn et al., 2007), this was not addressed by Monteiro and colleagues. Thus, questions remain regarding the salience of the secure base script as a determinant of fathers' parenting quality.

Among adults, secure base scripts are relatively stable (Vaughn et al., 2006; Waters et al., 2017) as long as the quality of relationships informing such scripts remains stable. While secure base scripts have not been examined directly as a psychological resource, research on attachment representations more globally suggests a secure attachment style prompts positive coping skills in adulthood (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998). On the other hand, lack of security (and presumably, lack of a secure base script) may increase vulnerability to stressors, leading to more maladaptive coping. Indeed, research has shown that relationship insecurity may be related to perceiving negative couple interactions more intensely, and positive interactions less favorably (Wood, Werner-Wilson, Parker, & Perry, 2012). Hence, presence, or lack of, the secure base script may impact individuals' perceptions and responses to stressors, including marital conflict.

The Current Study

Using a randomized controlled design, the current study investigates the effect of marital conflict on parenting behavior from a family systems perspective to identify risk and resiliency factors. We first explore the extent to which asking couples to discuss sources of conflict in the marital relationship induces negative parent-infant interactions. As we report elsewhere, we found no significant effect of a marital conflict discussion task on mother's negative parenting behaviors in this sample (Hibel & Mercado, *accepted*). Given documented parental gender differences in the salience of marital conflict as a disruptor of parenting behavior (e.g., Davies, Sturge-Apple, Woitach, & Cummings, 2009), in the current study we extend our previous work by exploring whether fathers who partake in a conflict discussion show heightened intrusiveness and emotional disengagement during free play with their infants compared to those who participate in a positive couple discussion. Since parenting behavior is influenced by multiple determinants (e.g., Belsky, 1984), we then explore marital withdrawal, and parents' psychological resources (i.e., secure base script knowledge) as predictors of parenting for both mothers and fathers. Specifically, as an initial step, we will examine the effects of withdrawal on parenting behavior, and whether such effects vary by topic of discussion (i.e., conflict vs. positive). Given that withdrawal is a particularly maladaptive marital behavior (e.g., Sturge-Apple et al., 2006), we expect it will play an independent role for predicting negative parenting behavior beyond topic of discussion (i.e., conflict vs. positive). Next, we will add secure base script knowledge to the model. To date, it is unknown what role scripts play in paternal behavior, but research with mothers suggests that those possessing more secure base script knowledge engage in more positive parenting (e.g., Hawkins et al., 2015). Though it is posited that both state-like inter-personal (i.e., marital withdrawal) and trait-like intra-personal (i.e., secure base script knowledge) factors have a direct influence on parenting, more than likely it is a combination of these characteristics that determine quality of care. To this end, we will lastly integrate previous research on marital conflict and secure base scripts by exploring their interactive effects on negative maternal and paternal parenting behaviors. Specifically, secure base script knowledge will be examined as a potential moderator of the marital-parental interface;

it is expected that lack of a secure base script may increase vulnerability to negative interactions, potentiating spillover from negative marital exchanges to parenting.

Method

Participants

Families (N = 115) were recruited from birthing classes, community flyers, and public birth announcements. As part of a larger investigation of family relationships approved by the university Institutional Review Board, eligibility criteria required families to consist of a non-pregnant biological mother, cohabiting father, and a 5–8 month old infant. Most couples were married (90.4%) an average of 4.5 years (SD = 3.0; Range: 0 – 17) at the time of the study; about half (57%) were first-time parents. Mothers ranged in age from 18 to 39 years (M = 29.3 years, SD = 4.5), while fathers were between 19 and 50 years of age (M = 31.5 years, SD = 5.5); infants (50% female) were approximately 5.9 months old (SD = .68; Range: 5 – 8). The majority of parents and children were non-Hispanic Caucasian (85% of mothers; 79% of fathers and infants). Most parents (42% of mothers; 45% of fathers) had completed a Bachelor's degree. Of those reporting household income (n = 112): 3.6% of families fell below $10,000 per year; 21.4% within the $10,000–29,000 range; 20.5% between $30,000 – 59,000; 19.6% between $60,000 – 89,000; 11.6% between $90,000 – 119,000; and 6.3% greater than $120,000[1].

Procedure

Eligible participants were invited to the laboratory to participate in the 2-hour study. Couples were block randomized on infant gender and then randomized into either a conflict (n = 57) or positive (n = 58) couple discussion task (Jouriles & Farris, 1992). All visits began by explaining the protocol and obtaining informed consent. Couples were next separated to fill out questionnaires prior to the discussion task. In the conflict discussion, mothers and fathers were each asked to independently rate a list of common problems that arise in couple relationships (e.g., division of labor, finances) to discern how problematic these issues are in their marriage. Two researchers identified the top three problems that both mothers and fathers agreed were most pervasive. Couples were asked to discuss these issues for 10 minutes. Couples in the positive discussion group were prompted to discuss three positive experiences such as how they met, what attracted them to one another other, and what drew them together. As a validity check, both parents independently rated similarity of their discussion to interactions at home, from 1 (*much more negative*) to 9 (*much more positive*). In the conflict group, mothers (73.7%) and fathers (68.5%) reported that their discussions were *about the same* or *slightly more positive* than at home. In the positive group, mothers (93.1%) and fathers (87.7%) also largely agreed that their lab discussion was *about the same* or *slightly more positive*.

Following the discussion task, mothers reunited with their infants for a semi-structured freeplay interaction. Mothers were instructed to play with their infant for 10 minutes as they

[1]Household income was reported categorically. Percentages do not equate to 100 due to a typographical error on the income questionnaire which included a '$50,000 – 69,000' category, overlapping with two adjacent income brackets. The remaining 17% of families selected this category.

normally would if they had free time. They could choose activities at will, but were provided with three developmentally appropriate toys (wordless picture book, a musical computer, and stacking rings) to use at their discretion. Following free-play, the infant engaged in a series of tasks designed to elicit fear and frustration (LAB-TAB; Goldsmith & Rothbart, 1988). During this task (3 min maximum) mothers remained in the room (out of sight) and were asked not to interact with the infant. The task was stopped and mothers were free to interact with the infant if he or she exhibited 20 seconds of hard crying or upon completion of the tasks.

While mother and infant engaged in freeplay and the LAB-TAB, fathers completed the Attachment Script Assessment (ASA; Waters & Rodrigues-Doolabh, 2001) in a separate room. Roughly 15 minutes after the completion of the infant challenge, the parents switched places—fathers and infants engaged in freeplay while mothers completed the ASA. The order in which mothers and fathers engaged in the freeplay and ASA were standardized across all visits. The decision to not counterbalance these tasks was related to investigative aims of the larger project from which this study derived. At the end of the visit, families were reunited and compensated $75 in appreciation of their time.

Measures

Marital withdrawal—The *System for Coding Interactions in Dyads* (*SCID*; Malik & Lindahl, 2004) was used to code the couple discussion task. The *SCID* demonstrates meaningful associations to other measures of marital functioning as well as adequate reliability (Davies et al., 2009; Malik & Lindahl, 2004). A *marital withdrawal* composite was computed by averaging scores across three subscales: maternal withdrawal, paternal withdrawal, and cohesiveness (reversed). At the individual level of analysis, maternal and paternal withdrawal indicate the extent to which the individual appears avoidant or emotionally detached during the marital discussion. At the dyadic level, coders also rated couple conversations for couple cohesion, with low levels indicative of aloofness, interpersonal distance, and couple disengagement. Two coders independently rated each subscale from 1 (*very low*) to 5 (*high*). Intraclass correlations (ICC) for the three subscales ranged from .81 to .90; all discrepancies were resolved through conferencing. A principal axis factor analysis (direct oblimin rotation) confirmed that the three subscales ($\alpha = .69$) load on a single factor, with correlations ranging from .32 to .49, p's < .001. Maternal and paternal withdrawal did not significantly differ, $t(114) = .23$, *ns*. Higher scores on the withdrawal composite indicate greater overall marital withdrawal for the couple.

Parenting behavior—Freeplay interactions were coded for the following aspects of parenting: sensitivity to non-distress, sensitivity to distress, intrusiveness, detachment, stimulation of cognitive development, positive regard, negative regard, and flat affect (see NICHD ECCRN, 1997, 1999). Two coders independently rated each subscale from 1 (*not characteristic*) to 4 (*very characteristic*); coders of mother and father behavior were independent and blind to other family information. Due to low prevalence of infant distress (no distress evident in 77% of mother-infant and 57% of father-infant interactions), the sensitivity to distress subscales were excluded from the current analyses. Furthermore, positive skew restricted inclusion of the negative affect and detachment subscales for

mothers and fathers. ICCs for the remaining five subscales ranged from .74 (flat affect) to .81 (sensitivity to non-distress) for fathers and .66 (positive regard) to .82 (flat affect) for mothers; all discrepancies were resolved through conferencing. Principal axis analyses (direct oblimin rotation) revealed two factors capturing negative parenting: *intrusion* and *emotional disengagement*. Intrusion ($\alpha_{mothers}$ = .83, $\alpha_{fathers}$ = .90) included intrusiveness and sensitivity to non-distress (reversed). Emotional disengagement ($\alpha_{mothers}$ = .87, $\alpha_{fathers}$ = .68) included positive regard (reversed) and flat affect. Composites of intrusion and emotional disengagement were calculated for each parent by averaging item scores for each subscale; higher scores reflect greater intrusion or disengagement.

Secure base scripts—The Attachment Script Assessment (ASA) was conducted with each parent to assess the secure base script. Empirical support for the reliability and validity of the ASA has been reported in previous studies, indicating moderate stability (e.g., Vaughn et al., 2006) and theoretically relevant associations with other attachment measures (e.g., Coppola et al., 2006; Steele et al., 2014; Waters & Waters, 2006). Each parent received four prompt word outlines designed to elicit narratives about attachment-related events. Two outlines (i.e., Baby's Morning, The Doctor's Office) address parent-child relationships while the other two (i.e., The Accident, Jane and Bob's Camping Trip) concern romantic relationships. Story order (e.g., romantic vs. parent-child) was randomized across couples. Participants were presented with each outline and were asked to construct a story. Participants were instructed to read down each column from left to right to develop an idea for the story. While the word outline provided a starting point, participants were encouraged to provide as much detail as they could to come up with the best story possible. Narratives were audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim.

Transcripts were coded by storyline with coders blind to scores on other narratives for the same individual and within the same couple. Two coders rated each narrative on a scale from 1 to 7 for how closely the narrative followed the secure base script. Higher scores indicate greater script knowledge (Waters & Rodrigues-Doolabh, 2001). Each prompt outline contains one or more words that signify a potentially distressing situation (e.g., accident), giving the attachment figure in the story the opportunity to recognize distress, respond sensitively, and return things to normal. Coding centered on whether narratives included and elaborated on these elements. ICCs across the four stories ranged from .61 to .81 for fathers and .70 to .84 for mothers. Discrepancies greater than 1.5 scale points were resolved via discussion. Final scores for each story were averaged across coders; parent-child and adult-adult narrative scores were correlated, $r_{mothers}$ = .53 and $r_{fathers}$ = .37, $ps < .001$. Consistent with other research using the ASA (e.g., Steele et al., 2014), an overall composite averaging scores across the four stories was computed.

Infant mood—Given that father-infant freeplay occurred following the LAB-TAB, child mood was coded as a potential covariate of parenting behavior. Again, there were relatively few instances of infant distress. Nevertheless, parent-infant interactions were coded for infant positive affect, negative affect, and sociability (NICHD ECCRN, 1999) on a scale from 1 (not characteristic) to 4 (very characteristic). Two coders trained to reach substantial agreement (ICC = .80) independently rated each scale; discrepancies were resolved by

consensus. A principal axis analysis (direct oblimin rotation) revealed one *infant mood* factor. A composite averaging scores on the positive affect, sociability, and negative affect (reversed) subscales was computed for each parent ($\alpha_{mothers}$ = .69, $\alpha_{fathers}$ = .75); higher scores indicate more positive mood.

Analytical Strategy

A series of path analyses were employed to study the impact of marital interactions and parental secure base scripts on mother' and fathers' parenting behaviors; this statistical approach was chosen as it allowed us to simultaneously model intrusive and emotionally disengaged parenting for both parents, maximizing statistical power given our sample size. Analyses were carried out in AMOS 23.0 (Arbuckle, 2014) utilizing maximum likelihood estimation. In each model, exogenous predictors and control variables were standardized and were allowed to covary. In our main analyses, we first explored whether fathers in the conflict discussion had greater intrusiveness and emotional disengagement compared to those in the positive discussion. We then examined whether marital withdrawal predicted parenting behaviors and whether this effect was moderated by discussion group. Next, we add secure base scripts to the model to identify if secure base scripts impact parenting behaviors, above and beyond discussion group and marital withdrawal. Lastly, we added the interaction between marital withdrawal and secure base scripts. Multiple group comparisons require independent groups (Kenny, 2011). Since mothers and fathers were nested within family, both parents were included in the same path analysis for the main analyses and critical ratio for differences *z*-statistics were examined to compare path estimates. To simplify figures, each parenting behavior (intrusion and emotional disengagement) and secure base scripts are presented only once, with estimates bolded for mothers and italicized for fathers.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among key variables are presented in Table 1. Sociodemographic variables (parental age, education, infant gender, length of relationship, first time parent status, family income) as well as infant mood were examined as potential covariates of intrusion and emotional disengagement. Demographic variables were unrelated to the parenting behaviors of mothers or fathers. However, infant mood was significantly related to both mother, $r = -.26$, $p = .005$, and father, $r = -.20$, $p = .04$, emotional disengagement, but not intrusion. Thus, infant mood and discussion group (where appropriate) were included as covariates in main analyses.

The conflict and positive discussion groups did not differ demographically. However, mothers in the positive group ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.12$) had marginally higher secure base script scores than mothers in the conflict group ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.89$), $t(113) = 1.68$, $p = .10$, $d = 0.31$. Groups also differed in terms of marital withdrawal, suggesting the conflict task was successful in eliciting negative interaction patterns. Specifically, couples in the conflict group had higher withdrawal during the discussion task ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 0.63$) compared to couples in the positive group ($M = 1.59$, $SD = 0.55$), $t(113) = -4.02$, $p < .001$, d

= 0.74. This is in line with our previous report (Hibel & Mercado, *accepted*). that both mothers and fathers in the conflict group showed significantly greater negativity and less positive affect during the marital discussion compared to mothers and fathers in the positive group.

Next, we tested within family differences in infant mood, secure base scripts, parental intrusion, and emotional disengagement. Paired sample *t*-tests indicated that infants did not differ in mood during freeplay with mothers and fathers. Further, mothers and fathers did not differ in terms of intrusive or emotionally disengaged parenting. However, mothers did have significantly higher secure base script scores than fathers, $t(114) = 2.78$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.30$ (see Table 1).

Main Analyses

Fathers' negative parenting behaviors in the conflict vs. positive discussion groups—A path analysis was used to examine discussion group as a predictor of fathers' negative parenting behaviors, controlling for infant mood. The model was fully saturated. Similar to reported findings for mothers (Hibel & Mercado, *accepted*), fathers in the conflict and positive groups did not differ in terms of intrusive, $\beta = .05$, *ns*, or emotionally disengaged, $\beta = .12$, *ns*, parenting.

Marital withdrawal and negative parenting behaviors in the conflict vs. positive discussion groups—A multiple group analysis was performed to determine if the proposed pathways from marital withdrawal to parenting behaviors varied as a function of discussion group. We compared model fit between an unconstrained model and a model in which all pathways between marital withdrawal and parenting behaviors were constrained to be equal. The models did not significantly differ in fit, $\chi^2_{diff}(4, N = 115) = 2.82$, $p = .59$, suggesting discussion group did not moderate associations between marital withdrawal and parenting behaviors. Given these findings, for remaining analyses, the groups are aggregated in analyses, though discussion group is included as a covariate. The overall marital withdrawal model fit the data well, $\chi^2(8, N = 115) = 4.65$, $p = .79$, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00 (90% CI [.00, .07]). Results revealed that after controlling for infant mood and discussion group, marital withdrawal was a significant predictor of father, $\beta = .30$, $p < .001$ .07, and mother, $\beta = .20$, $p = .03$, intrusion. Further, withdrawal also significantly predicted emotional disengagement for both parents. Specifically, higher levels of withdrawal were related to heightened emotional disengagement from fathers, $\beta = .32$, $p < .001$, and mothers, $\beta = .26$, $p = .004$. Critical ratio for difference *z*-statistics revealed that marital withdrawal was not a stronger predictor of one parenting behavior over the other; results revealed that this was true for mothers and fathers and that pathways between mothers and fathers did not significantly differ; *z*'s ranged from −.32 – .76, *p*'s > .05.

Secure base scripts as predictors of parenting—We then added secure base scripts to the model to determine relations to negative parenting behaviors. Model fit was excellent, $\chi^2(12, N = 115) = 7.51$, $p = .82$, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00 (90% CI [.00, .06]). As Figure 1 shows, after controlling for infant mood, discussion group, and accounting for the effects of marital withdrawal, higher secure base script scores among fathers were related to less

intrusion, $\beta = -.22$, $p = .01$, and less emotional disengagement, $\beta = -.25$, $p = .004$, but were unrelated to maternal parenting behaviors. Critical ratio for difference z-statistics were examined to determine whether secure base scripts were stronger predictors of one parenting behavior over the other; results revealed that this was not the case for mothers or fathers and that mothers' and fathers' pathways did not significantly differ, z's ranged from −.86 – .64, p's > .05.

The moderating role of secure base scripts—Next, we added the interaction between marital withdrawal and secure base scripts to examine their interactive contribution to negative parenting behaviors. The overall model fit the data well, $\chi^2(16, N = 115) = 18.46$, $p = .30$, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .04 (90% CI [.00, .10]). Results are presented in Figure 2. The interaction significantly predicted fathers' emotional disengagement during freeplay, $\beta = -.22$, $p = .01$, but was unrelated to fathers' intrusiveness, or maternal parenting behaviors. A plot of the interaction (see Figure 3) revealed that when fathers lack secure base script knowledge, they are more emotionally disengaged after having a withdrawn interaction with their partner. At the same time, the withdrawal X secure base script interaction was not a stronger predictor for emotional disengagement among father than mothers, $z = -.59$, $p = .28$.

Discussion

One of the primary aims of the current study was to examine the associations between marital conflict and negative parenting behaviors. We used a randomized controlled experiment of mothers, fathers, and their infants to explore under what conditions, and for whom, marital interactions impact parental caregiving. Contrary to our first hypothesis, the presence of marital conflict alone did not significantly impact paternal (this study) or maternal (Hibel & Mercado, *accepted*) parenting; mothers and fathers who participated in a conflict discussion were not more likely to be emotionally disengaged or intrusive during infant-parent interactions compared to those who participated in a positive discussion. However, when examining the *quality* of the marital interaction, a different story unfolded. Marital interactions characterized by withdrawal placed both mothers and fathers at risk for more negative parenting, regardless of discussion group. Given the heterogeneity of vulnerability to stress (e.g., Belsky, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van IJzendoorn, 2007), we also postulated that parents may differ in their risk to conflict based on secure base scripts. This hypothesis was partially supported; for fathers engaging in withdrawn marital interactions, secure base script knowledge buffered against emotionally disengaged parenting. Thus, fathers with secure base script knowledge responded sensitively and engaged with their babies even when spousal interactions were distant. Results highlight the importance of examining couple- and individual factors as targets of interventions for families at risk.

Marital conflict can consume parents' time and energy, compromising the quality of care parents provide for their children (e.g., Jouriles & Farris, 1992). Yet not all couple conflict is destined to be problematic (e.g., Katz, Wilson, & Gottman, 1999); it is a normal relationship process. It is how marital partners *handle* conflict that is paramount. In other words, certain interaction patterns may leave couples more susceptible to the nefarious effects of conflict

spillover (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). Findings from the current study support this assertion; engaging in a conflict discussion itself did not lead to significant differences in parenting. However, when marital interactions were emotionally distant and withdrawn, both mothers and fathers of infants were at risk for negative parenting. Though conflict discussion resulted in overall higher levels of withdrawal, the relationship between marital withdrawal and negative parenting emerged regardless of the valence of the discussion.

Inter-parental conflict marked by withdrawal is thought to be particularly distressing as it reflects psychological unavailability, apathy toward the relationship, and defeat (Gottman, 1993). By its very nature then, marital withdrawal signifies a *lack* of discussion, leaving issues unresolved and lingering (Cox et al., 1999). Enduring marital problems may strain and overwhelm emotional resources leaving couples with less energy to manage parent-child relationships (Buck & Neff, 2012). Thus, parents whose resources are taxed by marital interactions might be more prone to resort to negative parenting behaviors.

Furthermore, others have suggested that marital and parenting processes may both be impacted by underlying trait vulnerabilities (e.g., Margolin, John, Ghosh, & Gordis, 1996). That is, how parents manage stress in their marital relationship might be similar to how they respond in difficult parenting contexts. The current findings, however, do not completely support this notion. Specifically, couple withdrawal during the marital interaction significantly predicted both mothers' and fathers' intrusion *and* emotional disengagement. One potential explanation for this may be related to the developmental period under investigation. Infancy is a time of heightened stress on inter-parental relationships (Feinberg, 2002) and increased dependency on parental emotional resources (Cox et al., 1999). Perhaps dysfunctional marital interactions have a more global effect on parenting than at other developmental periods due to parents' already strained emotional reserves. Longitudinal research is needed to explore whether differential pathways of marital influence on parenting behaviors emerge only as the child ages.

Knowledge of the secure base script, derived from experiences in close relationships (Waters & Waters, 2006), serves as a resource as to how one should interpret and respond in attachment-relevant situations. When individuals possess a secure base script they are more likely to respond sensitively during interpersonal exchanges (e.g., Coppola et al., 2006). Surprisingly, mothers' secure base script knowledge was only marginally related to maternal parenting behaviors after controlling for infant mood and discussion task. This is inconsistent with previous research (Coppola et al., 2006; Hawkins et al., 2015) and may be related to differences in the context in which secure base scripts were assessed (i.e., in the current study, following a marital discussion; see *limitations* for further detail). However, this is the first known study to explicitly document the significant negative association between fathers' secure base script knowledge and emotionally disengaged and intrusive parenting. Similar to past research with mothers, fathers with secure base script knowledge emotionally engage with their infants during freeplay and follow the child's lead rather than imposing their own wishes during play.

For fathers, secure base scripts emerged as a protective factor, buffering emotional disengagement to their infants in the face of withdrawn marital interactions. Specifically,

fathers in disengaged or aloof marriages tend to be more emotionally uninvolved during parent-infant interactions. However, this was only true for fathers who lacked secure base script knowledge. Relationship insecurity may prime individuals to perceive negative couple interactions more harshly (Wood et al., 2012). As demonstrated in the current study, insecure scripts may serve as a diathesis for fathers that become activated under the stress (Phelps, Belsky, & Crnic, 1998) of emotionally distant marital interactions, and may threaten quality of paternal care. Conversely, secure attachment representations may buffer the effects of dysfunctional marital interactions on fathers' emotional disengagement. Past research has found that during conflictual marital interactions fathers are more likely to withdraw (Christensen & Heavey, 1990) and that negative marital interactions tend to be especially detrimental for paternal care (e.g., Cox et al., 1999; Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). While there was no difference in maternal and paternal levels of withdrawal in the current study, our findings confirm the implications of marital disengagement on fathers' parenting and extend this work, implicating multiple aspects of fathering behavior that are impacted by current marital functioning as well as relationship history.

For mothers, secure base script knowledge did not buffer emotionally disengaged infant-mother freeplay behaviors. It may be that dysfunctional marital interactions are a particularly potent stressor for mothers such that even those with a secure working model of attachment relationships are not protected against their effects. Or it may be that we have not pinpointed unique resiliency factors of mothers in this study. It is important to note, while not significant, the coefficient of mothers' secure base script X withdrawal interaction was in the same direction as the father interaction, and the two did not significantly differ. Thus, it is probable that the relationship between marital withdrawal, secure base scripts, and maternal emotional disengagement would emerge significant in a larger sample with greater power.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study contributes to our understanding of the interplay of marital relations and parenting behavior, several limitations exist. Although the sample was relatively heterogenous in terms of socioeconomic status, findings are largely limited to non-Hispanic Caucasian families in a non-clinical population. Data collected from clinical or abusive family populations may yield different results and may allow further testing regarding the extent to which stressful situations potentiate problematic functioning across family systems. Further limitations are related to the study design; specifically, the order parents interacted with the child could have influenced parenting behavior. Mothers engaged in freeplay immediately after the marital interaction whereas fathers completed the freeplay task at the end of the visit (roughly 60 mins after the marital interaction and 15 mins following a potentially distressing infant task). While infants were not more difficult with fathers vs. mothers, it could be that fathers were more fatigued by this point in the visit, possibly impacting parenting behavior. Alternatively, the fact that effects of marital withdrawal were found even 60 minutes after the discussion task may instead speak to the strength of spillover as a determinant of fathers' parenting.

The timing of the attachment script assessment could have also impacted results. Script assessments took place after the couple discussion task, which could have potentially primed the conflict group for narratives with more negative/unresolved content; this may explain the lower script scores for this group. Further, fathers completed the ASA directly following the couple discussion while mothers completed the ASA after freeplay. It is possible different family-level interactions (marital vs. parental) may have impacted secure base script content for fathers vs. mothers. However, if task order impacted scriptedness we would expect differential patterns between mother and father parent-child and adult-adult narratives (e.g., higher father adult-adult scriptedness and higher mother parent-child scriptedness, as well as larger correlations between marital withdrawal and father adult-adult scripts and mother parent-child scripts and parenting behaviors). Differential patterns were not detected, and follow-up analyses revealed that mothers had higher scriptedness scores than fathers on both types of narratives (see Table 1). Further, there was no correlation between marital withdrawal and fathers' adult-adult narratives and only marginally significant correlations between mothers' parent-child narratives and negative parenting, casting doubt on an order effect. While scripts are thought to be relatively stable (e.g., Waters et al., 2017), more research is needed to identify whether experimental tasks serve as primers (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001) that elicit different secure base script scores. Future studies should randomize the order of the freeplay task for mothers and fathers and/or collect secure base script knowledge at the beginning of the study prior to any experimental manipulations.

Implications

Understanding how conflict affects parenting and characteristics that make parents vulnerable to marital to parental spillover is particularly important given the disproportionate number of conflicted homes that contain young children (e.g., Emery, Fincham, & Cummings, 1992). Overall, findings suggest that multiple dimensions of parenting are influenced in response to marital withdrawal, but in different ways. Specifically, both mothers and fathers are likely to behave more intrusively with their infants after having a withdrawn marital discussion, regardless of their secure base script knowledge. However, for emotional disengagement, fathers are at particular risk only when they lack knowledge of the secure base script. Thus, interventions should be tailored to the presenting needs of each family and suggest that to reduce intrusive and harsh parenting, couple-level interventions aimed at enhancing emotional cohesion between marital partners may be effective for both mothers and fathers. For parents who struggle with being emotionally attuned to their infants, fathers who lack secure base script knowledge may also benefit from attachment-based therapies. Internal working models of attachment have been the target of attachment-based interventions, with the goal of providing insight on how the working model impacts parent-child interactions (Berlin, Zeanah, & Lieberman, 2008). Such interventions help individuals resolve previous caregiving experiences and offer an opportunity to (re)build their "picture" of how healthy relationships (both partner and parent-child) operate. Our findings suggest that the ASA may be a useful and inexpensive screening tool that may help individualize therapy to the needs of each family member. Additionally, given that internal working models remain amenable to change based on current relationships and environmental support, couple-level therapy targeting the quality of the marital relationship will only serve to further promote secure working models. Second generation research or

process-oriented research, such as the current study, that explore the mechanisms underlying negative parenting outcomes, are important for increasing the efficacy of clinical practices. Our findings suggest the need to address both couple and individual-level attributes to best meet the needs of the numerous families with young children living under stress.

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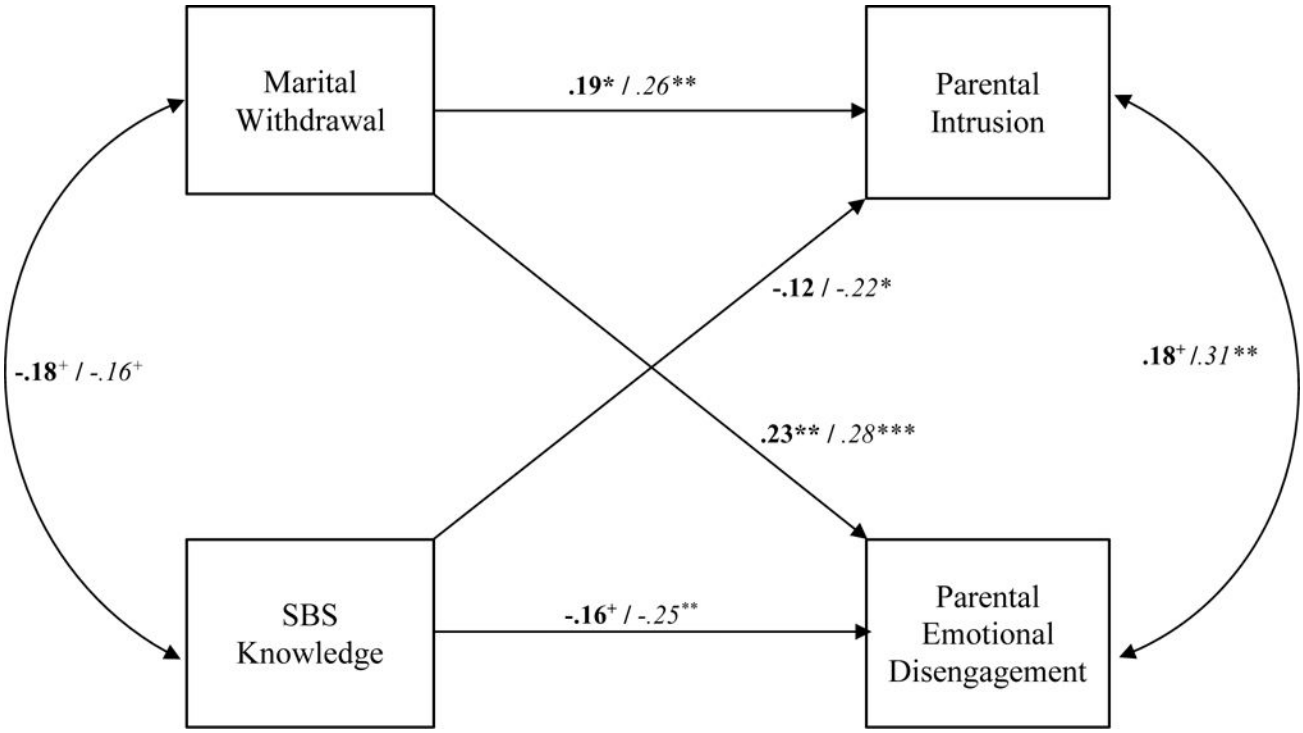

Figure 1.

Standardized coefficients for the path model examining the relationships between marital withdrawal and parenting behaviors for **mothers** and *fathers*. Mothers and fathers were included in one model (simplified here for ease of interpretation). All exogenous predictors were correlated across mothers and fathers; discussion group condition and infants' mood with each parent were controlled for. $^{+}p \leq .10$. $^{*}p \leq .05$. $^{**}p \leq .01$. $^{***}p \leq .001$.

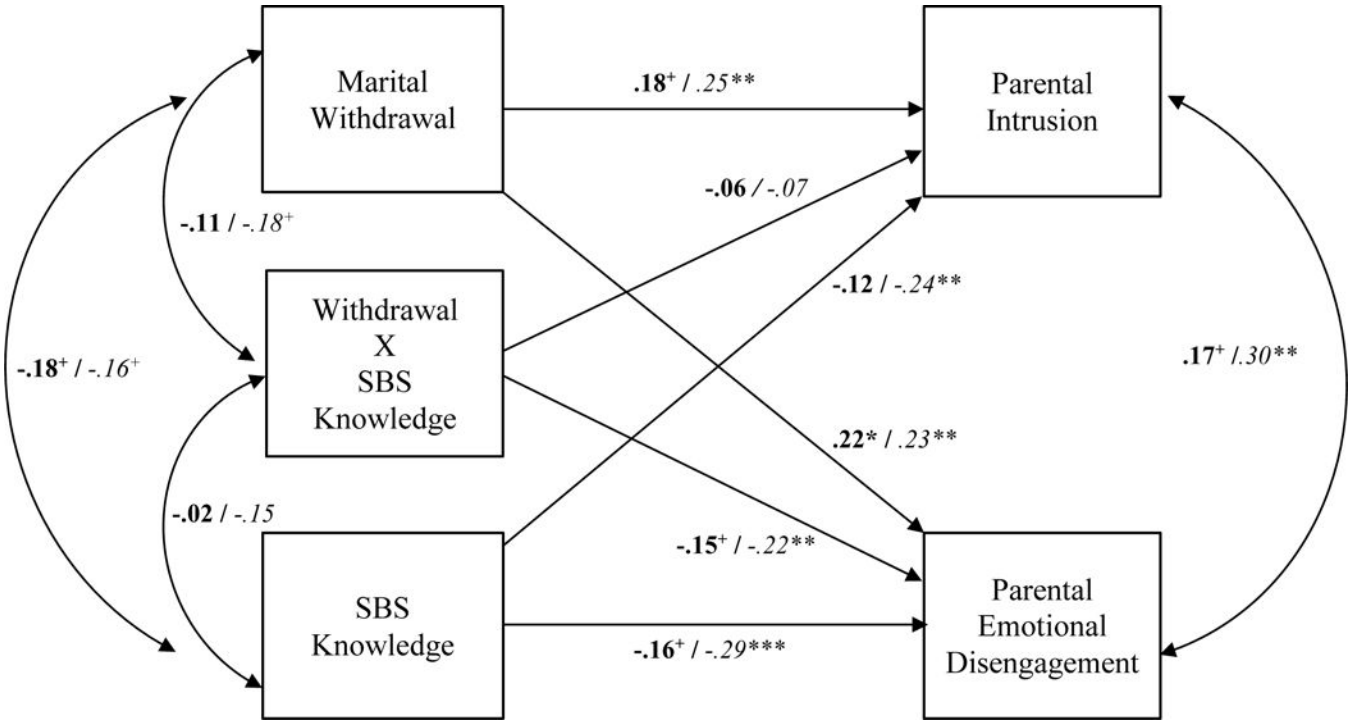

Figure 2.

Standardized coefficients for the path model examining the relationship between marital withdrawal and parenting behaviors for **mothers** and *fathers*, as moderated by parental secure base script (SBS) knowledge. Mothers and fathers were included in one model (simplified here for ease of interpretation). All exogenous predictors were correlated across mothers and fathers; discussion group condition and infants' mood with each parent were controlled for. $^{+}p \leq .10$. $*p \leq .05$. $**p \leq .01$. $***p \leq .001$.

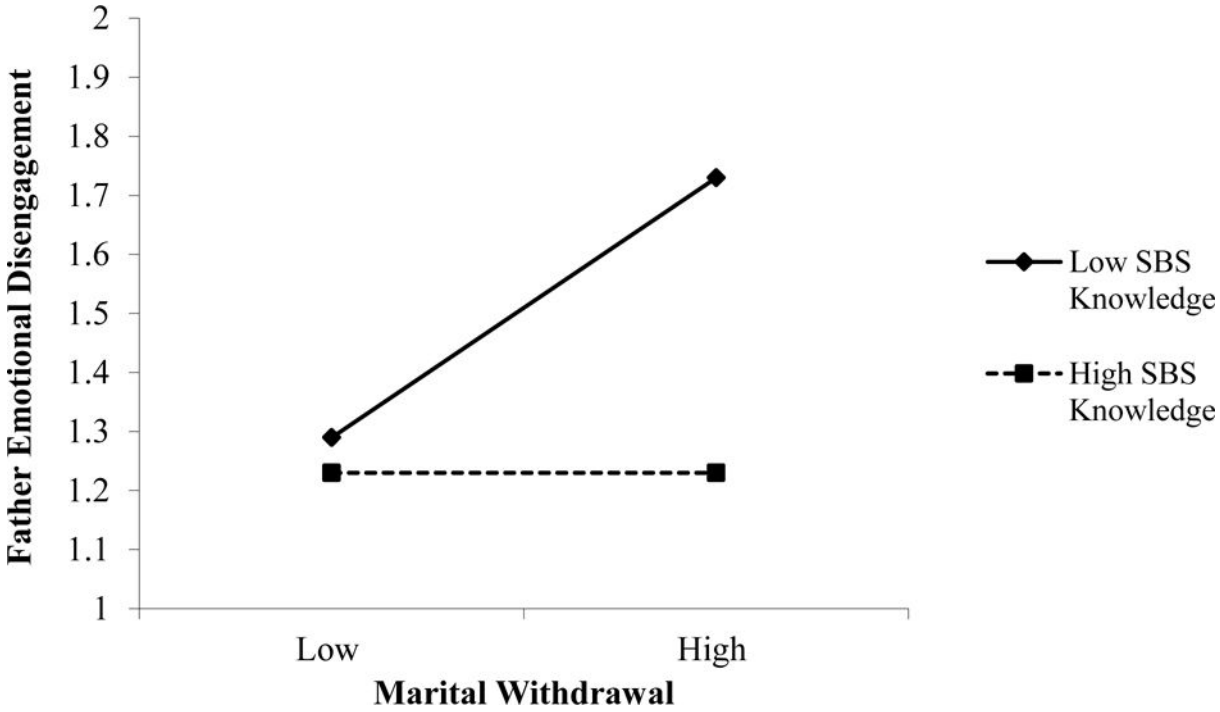

Figure 3.

Fathers who lack knowledge of the secure base script are more emotionally disengaged during freeplay episodes with their infants after engaging in withdrawn marital interactions, controlling for discussion group condition and infant mood. “Low” and “High” refer to -1 SD and +1 SD below and above the mean, respectively.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Key Variables (N = 115)

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Marital Withdrawal	1.81	0.63	—											
2. SBS[a] Mother	3.34	1.02	−.18^{+}	—										
3. P-C[b] SBS Mother	3.44	1.15	−.21*	.87***	—									
4. Rom[c] SBS Mother	3.23	1.18	−.11	.88***	.53***	—								
5. SBS Father	3.07	0.74	−.16^{+}	.36***	.33***	.29**	—							
6. P-C SBS Father	3.10	0.86	−.18^{+}	.31***	.29***	.25**	.81***	—						
7. Rom SBS Father	3.03	0.94	−.10	.28**	.26**	.23*	.84***	.37***	—					
8. Intrusion Mother	1.58	0.61	.21*	−.15	−.16^{+}	−.10	−.04	−.03	−.03	—				
9. Emo. Diseng Mother	1.36	0.56	.26**	−.20*	−.18^{+}	−.17^{+}	−.03	−.01	−.03	.24**	—			
10. Intrusion Father	1.57	0.62	.30***	−.04	−.04	−.03	−.27**	−.20*	−.24**	.10	.05	—		
11. Emo. Diseng Father	1.37	0.46	.32***	−.21*	−.21*	−.16^{+}	−.30***	−.22*	−.27**	.19*	.16^{+}	.41***	—	
12. First Time Parent[d]	—	—	−.09	−.19^{+}	−.12	−.22*	−.17^{+}	−.17^{+}	−.12	−.00	−.02	−.05	−.10	—

Note.

[a]SBS = Secure base script knowledge.

[b]P-C = Parent-child narratives.

[c]Rom = Romantic adult-adult narratives.

[d]First Time Parent: 0 = '*no*' and 1 = '*yes.*' Marital withdrawal and SBS were standardized for main analyses.

$^{+}p \leq .10$.

$^{*}p \leq .05$.

$^{**}p \leq .01$.

$^{***}p \leq .001$.

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