

BRIEF REPORT

A Dyadic Examination of Family-of-Origin Influence on Newlyweds' Marital Satisfaction

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The present study examined the influence of family-of-origin characteristics on current newlywed husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction, as well as possible mediation by current conflict resolution style. Results of a series of structural equation models, based on the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM), indicated that the family-of-origin characteristics (e.g., parental divorce, interparental conflict) were associated with lower marital satisfaction, especially for wives. Mixed evidence was found to indicate that conflict resolution style may partially mediate this relationship. Current findings provide evidence to support the phenomenon of the intergenerational transmission of marital quality found in the extant literature, but add to this literature by utilizing the APIM, including dyadic data collection and analyses techniques. Interpretations and implications are discussed, and future directions for research are suggested.

Keywords: intergenerational transmission, family-of-origin, marital satisfaction, conflict, dyadic methods

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Relationships, both with our family-of-origin and our family-of-choice, are influential and complex contexts of development, and undoubtedly color the lens through which individuals view the world. Moreover, the influence of one (family-of-origin) on the other (family-of-choice)—a process sometimes called “intergenerational transmission”—is currently an area of interest among many researchers, particularly in regard to marital quality. Although past research indicates that aspects of marital quality can be transmitted across generations (e.g., D’Onofrio et al., 2007), this issue deserves more attention, as the methodologies used in the previous research efforts have limitations.

Story, Karney, Lawrence, and Bradbury (2004) studied the intergenerational transmission of marital functioning in 60 newlywed couples, by collecting retrospective reports of negativity and divorce in spouses' families of origin, interactional processes likely to increase the risk for negative marital outcomes (i.e., communication style, psychological and physical aggression), and

actual marital outcomes. Story et al. concluded that negative interpersonal processes may be the mechanism that transfers experiences in the family-of-origin into experiences in marriage.

The current study adds to this literature by following the lead of and heeding the suggestions of Story et al. (2004) by: (a) including the potential influence of both family-of-origin structure and conflict in examining intergenerational transmission; and (b) formally testing a possible mediator of this process.

Moreover, the current study expands upon the work of Story et al. (2004) by utilizing a completely dyadic approach, and examining these variables within an Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Cook & Kenny, 2005). Much of the previous research in this area, including Story et al. (2004), has isolated husbands' and wives' variables and/or computed couple scores by summing the responses of husbands and wives (approaches that have been criticized for ignoring the inherently interdependent nature of these variables). The APIM allows the current study to not only measure how spouses' current marital satisfaction is predicted by their own family-of-origin characteristics (i.e., actor effect), but also how spouses' current marital satisfaction is predicted by their partner's family-of-origin characteristics (i.e., partner effect), simultaneously within the same model—therefore, more realistically representing the dyadic nature of this phenomenon.

Sabatelli and Bartle-Haring (2003) utilized a dyadic approach to examine how family-of-origin experiences influence marital adjustment in a sample of long-term couples (married an average of 23 years). They found evidence that wives' family-of-origin experiences, more so than husbands', were central to the prediction of marital adjustment. Although their constructs were conceptual-

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ized very differently than in the current study, their work demonstrates the importance of using a dyadic approach when examining intergenerational transmission. In addition, their findings support the choice of the current researchers to compare actor and partner effects to account for any potential gender differences.

In past research by Story et al. (2004) and others (e.g., Amato, 1996), interpersonal variables have proven more compelling in explaining and/or mediating the intergenerational transmission effect than have demographic variables. As such, the current study will focus on formally assessing an interpersonal mediator, specifically conflict resolution style.

Conflict resolution is a key relationship skill that is highly predictive of marital quality and satisfaction (e.g., Schneewind & Gerhard, 2002). More specifically, couples' marital satisfaction is positively related to the frequency with which each spouse uses constructive strategies to resolve conflict (e.g., compromise) and negatively related to the frequency with which each spouse uses destructive strategies to resolve conflict (e.g., withdrawal; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). The current study includes measures of both positive and negative conflict resolution strategies.

Although the link between family-of-origin experiences and relationship processes has been well established (e.g., Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000), as has the link between relationship processes and marital satisfaction (e.g., Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993), few existing studies have integrated these two links by explicitly examining relationship processes as a possible mediator of the intergenerational transmission of marital quality.

Based on the existing theoretical frameworks and empirical findings on the intergenerational transmission of marital quality discussed above, the current study examines a model that conceptualizes the relationship between family-of-origin characteristics and current marital quality, and the possible mediating role of conflict resolution style in that relationship. Specifically, family-of-origin characteristics are expected to be negatively associated with current marital quality for both husbands and wives. Further, conflict resolution style is expected to mediate the association between family-of-origin characteristics and current marital satisfaction for both husbands and wives, as reflected in both actor and partner effects.

Method

Procedures

Dyadic data for the current study were collected as part of the Early Marriage Study (see Segrin, Hanzal, & Domschke, 2009). To be eligible to participate, couples had to be newlyweds married for 5 years or less, and in their first marriage. In addition, both members of the couple had to be willing to participate.

Couples were recruited using two different Internal Review Board-approved methods. The first method used courthouse records of marriage licenses filed within the past 5 years to identify potential participants. Couples willing to take part in the study were mailed two sets of surveys, consent forms, and preaddressed stamped envelopes, and were instructed to return their surveys independently to receive \$10 gift cards. This recruitment method yielded a 24% response rate, which is comparable to previous studies (e.g., Johnson et al., 2005; Kurdek, 1991). Approximately

one quarter of the total sample ($n = 47$ couples) was recruited with this method.

The remaining participants were recruited through solicitations in undergraduate classes at a large university. Students were offered extra credit toward their course grade if they provided researchers with an eligible couple's names and contact information. These eligible couples were then mailed surveys (as above). Of the 248 couples who were referred by students, 74% ($n = 184$ couples) actually participated.

Of the 231 couples who mailed back completed surveys (from both recruiting methods), 194 couples met the eligibility criteria to participate. Surveys from four additional couples were excluded from data analysis because there was a significant amount of missing data in the responses, yielding a final sample size of 190 couples.

Participants

The sample used for the current analyses consisted of 190 couples (380 individuals) who ranged in age from 18 to 49 years, with 95% of the sample age 35 or younger. The mean age for husbands was 27.8 ($SD = 5.1$) and the mean age for wives was 26.1 ($SD = 4.4$). Length of marriage ranged from 1 month to 5 years ($M = 20$ months). A majority of the husbands and wives identified themselves as White (78% and 75%, respectively), with the remainder of the sample identifying as Hispanic (13% and 14%, respectively), or as another race or ethnicity (e.g., American Indian or African American; 9% and 11%, respectively). Years of education in the sample ranged from 8 to 25, with the educational level for both husbands and wives averaging ~ 3.5 years of college. For both husbands and wives the majority of the participants were employed full-time (83% and 61%, respectively), and 25% of the couples in the sample had at least one child.

While the second recruiting method had the potential to yield a somewhat biased sample of newlywed couples, the first recruiting method was used to off-set this bias by capturing a more representative sample of the population of newlywed couples. It should be noted that the demographic characteristics of the participants from the two different recruiting methods were quite similar on most variables, with the exception of employment status (for wives only). A higher percentage of wives recruited through the courthouse records reported being unemployed at the time of the survey (12% as compared with 2%), although this was the only statistically significant difference between the two groups, $\chi^2(4, N = 190) = 9.69, p < .05$. There were no significant differences between the two groups on any of the study variables.

Measures

Parental marital status. Parental marital status was assessed with one dichotomous item that asked "Were your parents ever divorced or separated for a period of more than one year?" (where 1 = *yes*, and 0 = *no*).

Family-of-origin conflict. Conflict in the family-of-origin was assessed with the conflict subscale of the Family Environment Scale (FES; Moos & Moos, 1994). For this 9-item subscale, participants were asked to think about the family they grew up with, and indicate on a 5-point Likert-type scale (where 1 = *strongly disagree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*) how much they agreed

or disagreed with statements such as, “We fight a lot in our family” and “Family members hardly ever lose their tempers” (reverse coded). This subscale has been found to be reliable in past research (e.g., $\alpha = .95$; Moos & Moos, 1994), as well as in the current study ($\alpha = .83$ for husbands, $\alpha = .80$ for wives).

Interparental conflict. Interparental conflict was measured using the 13-item Perceptions of Interparental Conflict-I/F Scale (PIC-I/F), which is a shortened version of the Children’s Perceptions of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC; Kline, Wood, & Moore, 2003). This scale was designed to measure participants’ perceptions of conflict in their parents’ relationships, and has been validated with young adults from both divorced and nondivorced families (Bickham & Fiese, 1997). Moreover, it has been shown to be significantly related to parent reports of conflict, as well as indices of child adjustment (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). The items, such as “I often saw my parents arguing,” and “When my parents had an argument, they yelled a lot” were rated on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). This scale has been shown to be reliable in past research (e.g., $\alpha = .83$; Kline et al., 2003), as well as in the current study ($\alpha = .94$ for husbands and wives).

Marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was assessed using the Quality Marriage Index (QMI; Norton, 1983), which is a global measure of marital satisfaction. This scale consists of five items asking participants to rate the extent to which they agree with statements about their marriage (e.g., “We have a good marriage”), and one item asking participants to rate their overall happiness with their marriage. For this study, all items on this scale contained response choices ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 10 (*strongly agree*). Past research has found this scale to be highly reliable for husbands and wives ($\alpha = .96$ and $\alpha = .96$, respectively; Johnson & Bradbury, 1999), as did the current study ($\alpha = .93$ and $\alpha = .96$, respectively).

Conflict resolution style. Conflict resolution style was assessed using the Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI; Kurdek, 1994). The CRSI measures the frequency of use of various strategies for dealing with conflict, assessed by four items each, including positive problem solving (e.g., “focusing on the conflict at hand”), conflict engagement (e.g., “exploding and getting out of control”), compliance (e.g., “not defending my position”), and withdrawal (e.g., “tuning the other person out”). For every item, each partner was asked to indicate how frequently (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*) they use that particular strategy to deal with arguments or disagreements with their partner. Reliability on each of the self-report subscales has been moderate in past research (ranging from .77 to .85, and .66 to .86, for husbands and wives, respectively; Kurdek, 1994), and was acceptable in the current study (ranging from .76 to .80, and .72 to .80, for husbands and wives, respectively).

Analyses

The data was analyzed using *SEM* with maximum likelihood estimation in LISREL Version 8.8 software. Analysis proceeded along several steps. First, to determine the relationship between the indicators and the latent constructs, a confirmatory factor analysis (i.e., measurement model) was constructed and assessed. The scale was set by fixing the variance of the latent constructs to 1, and all latent variables were allowed to covary. In addition, parallel indi-

cators (e.g., positive problem solving for husbands, and positive problem solving for wives) were allowed to covary, given their similar scaling and content.

The latent variables for the multifaceted constructs of family-of-origin characteristics and conflict resolution style were created using the internal-consistency approach to parceling, with each indicator representing different facets of the latent construct (Little, Cunningham, Shadar, & Widaman, 2002). Family-of-origin characteristics was comprised of three indicators: (a) parental marital status, (b) interparental conflict, and (c) family-of-origin conflict. Current couple conflict resolution style was also comprised of three indicators (subscales of the CRSI) including: (a) conflict engagement, (b) positive problem solving, and (c) withdrawal.

The indicators of family-of-origin were selected because previous research has concluded that adults who experienced a parental divorce, and/or high levels of interparental conflict, had fewer opportunities to learn key interpersonal skills such as positive conflict-resolution strategies (e.g., Amato, 1996), which may account for the connection between parent and offspring divorce. Moreover, according to social-cognitive theory, people can learn patterns of behavior simply by observing the behaviors of others, and observational learning can be a powerful cognitive process which can predict future outcomes (Bandura, 2001). It should be noted, that while one dichotomous indicator is included in this latent variable, this indicator is not skewed and is coded in the same direction as the other indicators, and therefore does not pose a threat to the robustness of the parameter estimates (see Ethington, 1987; Muthén, 1984).

Marital satisfaction was comprised of three indicators, which are each parcels of items from the QMI. In this case a modified balance technique was used to maximize the variance of each parcel (Landis, Beal, & Tesluk, 2000), and to mitigate the potential “honeymoon effect” on the outcome variable by maximizing or “balancing” the variance of each parcel (for a discussion of parceling to overcome problems associated with non-normally distributed data see Hau & Marsh, 2004). For a review of the practical and statistical implications of parceling, see Little et al. (2002). In addition, see Table 1 for the correlation matrix and descriptive statistics of all latent variables, and Table 2 of the online supplementary material for the correlation matrix and descriptive statistics of all manifest variables.

Next, once the measurement model was established to fit the data, a series of structural models designed to represent a mediated version of the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Cook & Kenny, 2005) with these data were tested. First, an unrestricted APIM-based model of the data was assessed that included all possible direct paths from the predictor variables to the outcome variables, as well as all possible indirect paths including the mediator variable. Second, a more restricted APIM-based model of the data was assessed, which included only the indirect paths from the predictor to the outcome through the mediator. Third, to address hypothesis 2 which predicted that conflict resolution style would mediate the relationship between family-of-origin characteristics and marital satisfaction, the mediating effect of conflict resolution style was statistically assessed within each theoretically relevant pathway with the use of a Sobel’s test (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002).

Table 1
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of Husband Reported (H) and Wife Reported (W) Latent Variables ($N = 190$)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Family of origin (H)	—					
2. Conflict resolution style (H)	.10	—				
3. Marital satisfaction (H)	-.08	-.24**	—			
4. Family of origin (W)	.23**	.14	-.10	—		
5. Conflict resolution style (W)	.13	.34**	-.18*	.22**	—	
6. Marital satisfaction (W)	-.11	-.26**	.58**	-.30**	-.21**	—
<i>M</i>	—	2.72	9.19	1.80	2.80	9.06
<i>SD</i>	—	.36	1.00	.39	.32	1.29

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

In addition, to compare and contrast parallel actor and partner effects, a series of nested structural models of the data were statistically compared using the χ^2 difference test. For each parallel actor and partner effect, a less restricted model (that allowed the parallel actor or partner paths to vary freely) was statistically compared with a more restricted model (that constrained the parallel actor or partner paths to be equal). Finally, using the information from the unrestricted and restricted structural models, as well as the nested models comparing parallel paths, a final model was constructed to most closely represent the data.

Results

In the measurement model, three latent variables were created for husbands and wives, resulting in a six factor solution that obtained close fit ($\chi^2 = 162.56$, $df = 111$, $p < .001$; Comparative Fit Index [CFI] = 0.98; Non-normed Fit Index [NNFI] = 0.97; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation [RMSEA] = 0.04_(.02-.06)), with good to excellent item factor loadings, as shown in Figure 1 of the online supplementary material. The indicators of conflict resolution style include both constructive (i.e., positive problem solving) and destructive (i.e., conflict engagement) conflict resolution strategies; however, higher values of this latent construct are most

meaningfully interpreted as higher usage of destructive conflict strategies, as the indicator for positive problem solving had a negative loading. In addition, the CRSI subscale representing compliance was not utilized in the final analyses, as preliminary data analyses could not clearly establish its valence, and there is a precedent in previous publications for utilizing this scale without the compliance subscale when examining marital relationships (e.g., Van Doorn, Branje, & Meeus, 2007).

Family-of-Origin Characteristics and Marital Satisfaction

A series of APIM structural models were run to assess the relationship between family-of-origin characteristics and current marital satisfaction, as well as the extent to which conflict resolution style potentially mediated that relationship.

An unrestricted APIM-based model of the data simultaneously evaluating all possible direct and indirect (i.e., through conflict resolution) paths between family-of-origin characteristics and marital satisfaction showed acceptable fit ($\chi^2 = 197.77$, $df = 120$, $p < .001$; CFI = 0.96; NNFI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.05_(.04-.07)). While the direct path from husbands' family-of-origin characteristics to husbands' marital satisfaction was not significant, this model provided some evidence to support our first hypothesis, as the direct path from wives' family-of-origin to wives' marital satisfaction was significant ($b = -.29$, $p < .01$).

A more restricted APIM-based model of the data was assessed, which included only the indirect paths from the predictor to the outcome through the mediator. As was the case with the unrestricted model, this model also displayed acceptable fit ($\chi^2 = 210.78$, $df = 124$, $p < .001$; CFI = 0.96; NNFI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.06_(.04-.07)).

Conflict Resolution Style as a Mediator

The possible mediating effect of conflict resolution style was statistically assessed within each theoretically relevant pathway with the use of a Sobel's test (MacKinnon et al., 2002). For the indirect actor effect of family-of-origin characteristics on marital satisfaction through conflict resolution style (e.g., husbands' family \rightarrow husbands' conflict resolution style \rightarrow husbands' marital satisfaction), results of the Sobel's test provided some evidence for mediation, as the mediating effect approached significance ($z = -1.84$, $p = .065$). In addition, the indirect partner effects of

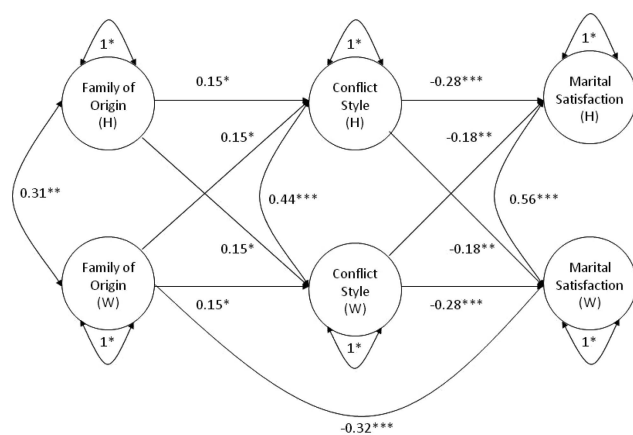


Figure 1. Final structural equation model of effect of family-of-origin on marital satisfaction. $\chi^2 = 199.886$, $df = 127$, $n = 190$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = 0.048_(.032-.063); NNFI = 0.96; CFI = 0.97; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

family-of-origin characteristics on marital satisfaction (e.g., husbands' family → wives' conflict resolution style → wives' marital satisfaction) also approached significance ($z = -1.83, p = .067$), providing some additional evidence for partial mediation. The interpersonal indirect effects (e.g., husband's family → wives' conflict resolution style → husbands' marital satisfaction) were not significant ($z = -1.62, p = .11$).

Comparing Actor and Partner Effects

To compare and contrast parallel actor and partner effects, a series of nested structural models of the data were statistically compared using the χ^2 difference test. For each parallel actor and partner effect, a less restricted model (that allowed the parallel actor or partner paths to vary freely) was statistically compared to a more restricted model (that constrained the parallel actor or partner paths to be equal). Chi-square difference tests for each set of nested models revealed there were no statistically significant differences in any indirect paths.

Conceptualizing Intergenerational Transmission

Given the information from the unrestricted and restricted structural models, as well as the nested models comparing parallel paths, a final model was constructed to most closely represent the data. This model (see Figure 1) retains all of the indirect paths of the more restricted model, as well as the direct path from wives' family-of-origin characteristics to wives' marital satisfaction that was found to remain significant in the unrestricted structural model. In addition, because there was no statistical difference between any of the parallel actor and partner effects, these pathways were constrained to be equal in the final model to increase statistical power. This final model represents the data significantly better than the restricted model, as evidenced by a χ^2 difference test ($\Delta\chi^2(3) = 10.90; p < .01$), and is more parsimonious (e.g., fewer paths) than the unrestricted structural model. This model closely fits the data according to both absolute and relative fit indexes ($\chi^2 = 199.89, df = 127, p < .001$; CFI = 0.97; NNFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.05_[.03-.06]), and each parameter (or individual path) within the model is statistically significant.

Discussion

The current findings support the notion of intergenerational transmission of marital quality, and reinforce the association between family-of-origin characteristics and marital satisfaction that has been documented in previous research (e.g., Story et al., 2004). This was especially true for wives, as the direct path from wives' family-of-origin to wives' marital satisfaction was significant above and beyond the other predictors in the model.

Beyond the fit of the overall model—the fact that each parameter (or individual path) within the model is statistically significant provides evidence to support the current conceptualization of the phenomenon of the intergenerational transmission of marital quality (see Figure 1). Specifically, the statistically significant actor effects of family-of-origin on conflict resolution style indicate that each partners' family-of-origin experience has an association with their own current conflict resolution style. Surprisingly, the statistically significant partner effects of family-of-origin on partners'

conflict resolution style indicate that one's conflict resolution style is also influenced by the family-of-origin experience of his or her spouse.

The seemingly equivalent actor and partner effects in this case could mean a number of things. First, they may be a result of the interdependent nature of marriage and the concepts themselves. Another possible explanation for the similarity in actor and partner effects in this case can be found in mate selection theory (Eckland, 1982), and the fact that any research that studies married couples is inherently susceptible to selection effects. That is, participants choose to get married, and they choose whom to marry—presumably not at random—and therefore, these systematic patterns of selection may influence the findings in systematic ways. Moreover, there is evidence to support the notion that individuals choose marriage partners who are similar to them in many ways (i.e., assortative mating)—including family-of-origin characteristics and the experience of a parental divorce in particular (Wolfiner, 2003). If this is the case for couples in the current study, this may (at least partially) account for some of the similarity in the actor and partner effects of families of origin. Finally, these similarities could be due in some part to confirmation bias. That is, individuals are biased toward spouses who verify their self-views, and potentially have families of origin that display conflict styles that more closely resemble their own.

However, the fact that there were unique and statistically significant partner effects above and beyond the actor effects and the significant correlation of the husbands' and wives' reports of family-of-origin experience and conflict resolution style, indicates that this finding is not only an artifact of assortative mating, but may also be a function of a potential direct influence of a spouse's family-of-origin on current marital outcomes. This is a finding that warrants more attention in future studies.

An examination of the actor and partner effects of conflict resolution styles on marital satisfaction provides evidence that spouses' destructive strategies for handling conflict in a relationship predict lower levels of their own marital satisfaction, as well as their partner's marital satisfaction. This finding is not surprising, as previous research has consistently found a connection between how conflict is handled and marital satisfaction, but the current research adds to the previous literature by directly testing these effects within a dyadic model.

The second hypothesis of the current study, that conflict resolution style would fully mediate the relationship between family-of-origin and marital satisfaction, was not supported. However, the current findings indicate that conflict resolution style may partially mediate this association. Although Sobel's tests of the individual mediating pathways only approached significance, it should be noted that in the final constrained model, the indirect effects of family-of-origin on marital satisfaction were statistically significant, providing evidence that in the entire model conflict resolution style at least partially mediates the association between family-of-origin and marital satisfaction for husbands and wives.

These findings imply that conflict resolution style is an important mechanism of the intergenerational transmission of marital quality, but that it does not fully explain this process. Indeed, a number of other potential mediators that have been examined (e.g., attitudes toward marriage); however, they are not often examined dyadically, or subjected to formal tests of mediation. Our understanding of the intergenerational transmission of marital

quality would benefit from the examination of other potential mediators with the dyadic methodologies used in the current study. In addition, future research should focus on potentially comparing or contrasting different possible mediators in the same study.

Interpretation of the present findings must be tempered by several considerations. First, family-of-origin characteristics were measured with the retrospective accounts at the same time that current marital satisfaction was measured. This cross-sectional design introduces potential recall bias, and cannot be used to establish causation. Second, the current study does not report on the effects of potentially important demographic variables (such as whether or not the couple cohabitated before getting married). Finally, the use of latent variables and structural equation modeling—arguably a significant statistical strength of the current study beyond its utility for interdependent data—also has shortcomings. Specifically, as is the case with any research utilizing this technique, the results cannot be interpreted as the only explanation that “fits” the data. Although theoretical rationale and empirical evidence support the current configuration of the variables within the model, the results do not preclude the possibility that a model configuring the variables differently would not also fit the data well (e.g., Edwards & Bagozzi, 2000).

The current study provides evidence to support focusing efforts on a potential area of intervention for working with married couples—conflict resolution strategies. Examining the origins of husbands’ and wives’ conflict resolution strategies, and how their respective families of origin may be currently influencing their marital functioning, gives practitioners a point of intervention for working with couples in therapeutic or educational settings. Although recent discourse on this issue has questioned the empirical evidence of the effectiveness of this approach (e.g., Johnson, 2012), intervention studies provide promising evidence that it can improve relationship processes and satisfaction (e.g., Halford & Bodenmann, 2013), especially in high-risk couples.

The current study adds to the growing body of literature that sheds light on the process of how marital quality may be transmitted across generations. Specifically, the data support previous findings about the influence of families-of-origin on current marital outcomes, and provides some evidence that conflict resolution style partially mediates this association. Future research should further explore these issues by utilizing dyadic data analyses techniques, and by formally testing other possible mediators of this process.

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