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## **Marital Dissatisfaction, Psychological Control and Parent-child Conflict in Chinese Families - An Actor-partner Interdependence Model Analysis**

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**Title: Marital Dissatisfaction, Psychological Control and Parent-child Conflict in Chinese Families - An Actor-partner Interdependence Model Analysis**

**Abstract**

Although family systems theories highlight the associations of marital quality with parenting practice and parent-child relationship, studies examining individual and inter-spousal linkages of marital dissatisfaction with psychological control and parent-child conflict among Chinese families are almost non-existent. Adopting the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM), dyadic interdependence in the associations of marital dissatisfaction with psychological control and parent-child conflict were examined in a sample of 386 Chinese families in Hong Kong. Fathers, mothers and adolescent children were involved in the data collection ( $M_{\text{father's age}} = 48.7$ ;  $M_{\text{mother's age}} = 44.7$ ;  $M_{\text{children's age}} = 14.6$ ; 53.1% of adolescents were boys). Results showed that while father-perceived marital dissatisfaction was positively associated with paternal and maternal psychological control, mother-perceived marital dissatisfaction was not. Moreover, marital dissatisfaction perceived by each parent was linked to greater conflict between their children and the other parent, but it was not associated with his/her own conflict with children. The findings showed that Chinese fathers who perceived greater marital dissatisfaction might spill over their stress and hostility from marital dissatisfaction to practicing paternal psychological control and trigger their spouse to exercise maternal psychological control for their children. Besides, poorer marital satisfaction might be linked to conflictual relationship between their children and their spouse, hence increasing the risk of family triangulation. The present study suggests the importance of adopting a family-based intervention approach in helping Chinese parents facing marital dissatisfaction.

**Keywords:** marital dissatisfaction, psychological control, parent-child conflict, Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM), Chinese families

## **Introduction**

The associations of marital quality with parenting practice and parent-child relationship have been widely researched in the past few decades in Western societies (e.g., Erel & Burman, 1995; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Ponnet, Mortelmans, Wouters, van Leeuwen, Bastaits, & Pasteels, 2013). Based on family systems theories (Belsky, 1990; Cox & Paley, 2003), marital quality is an important determinant of parenting and parent-child relationship (e.g., Ponnet et al., 2013). Special attention has been put on whether there is support for the spill-over hypothesis (i.e., poorer marital quality leads to poorer parent-child quality due to the transfer of anger and hostility from the parent to the children; Erel & Burman, 1995) or compensatory hypothesis (i.e., poorer marital quality leads to better parent-child quality because of compensation for the loss of marital relationship; Erel & Burman, 1995). However, the results are not conclusive in the existing literature. While some studies showed that fathers were more likely to spill over their stress from marital dissatisfaction to parent-child relationship than were mothers (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Lindsey, Caldera & Tankersley, 2009; Davies, Sturge-Apple, Woitach, & Cummings, 2009; Stroud, Durbin, Wilson, & Mendelson, 2011), the associations of marital dissatisfaction with parent-child relational qualities were similar between fathers and mothers in other studies (Erel & Burman, 1995; Ponnet et al., 2013). Moreover, there is less coverage on inter-spousal associations of marital dissatisfaction with parenting and parent-child relational quality between fathers and mothers (i.e., whether one's perception of marital dissatisfaction is associated with the partner's parenting practice and parent-child relational qualities) in the family literature.

In the scientific literature, research examining the associations of marital qualities with parenting and parent-child relationship has been predominated by studies in the U.S. and Europe (e.g., Coe, Davies, Hentges, & Sturge-Apple, 2020; Grych, Raynor, & Fosco, 2004;

Ponnet et al., 2013), while only very few studies have been conducted in Chinese societies (e.g., Shek, 2000; Chang, Lansford, Schwartz, & Farver, 2004). Based on the Confucian thoughts where familism is emphasized, family harmony, solidarity and prosperity are regarded as core values of Chinese families (Yeh & Yang, 1997). Poor marital relationship is regarded as a disruption to family solidarity and family reputation (Hwang, 2000), which creates distress and anxiety to Chinese parents (Cao, Zhou, Fang, & Fine, 2017; Chang et al., 2004). Hence, parents may easily spill over their stress to their children via negative parenting practice (Shek, 2000). However, there is an alternative view that parents pay more attention to their children when facing marital dissatisfaction, and parent-child coalition may be formed to resolve the tension brought by marital dissatisfaction (Chan, 2009; Minuchin, 1974). To a certain extent, this parent-child coalition is important to maintain pseudo harmony within the family system (Chan, 2013). Hence, it is important to examine the associations of marital dissatisfaction with parenting practice and parent-child relationship in Chinese families. Unfortunately, existing studies mainly focused on the association of one's own perception of marital quality with one's parenting practice and/or parent-child relationship (e.g., Shek, 2000; Chang et al., 2004), whereas inter-spousal linkages of marital quality with parenting and parent-child conflict between Chinese fathers and mothers remain unexplored.

In this study, we examined the individual and inter-spousal associations of fathers' and mothers' perceptions of marital dissatisfaction with parental psychological control and parent-child conflict among Chinese families in Hong Kong. According to Westman, Vinokur, Hamilton, & Roziner (2004), marital dissatisfaction was defined as "a negative cognitive and emotional reaction to the marital relationship" (p. 769). Evidence shows that marital dissatisfaction is related to one's depressive symptoms (e.g., Woods, Priest, Signs, & Maier, 2019) and maladaptive inter-parental communication (e.g., violent behaviour,

avoidance) (Bertoni & Bondenmann, 2010) that may lead to lower family cohesion and affection (Katz & Woodin, 2002). Regarding psychological control, it is defined as an intrusion of parents into their children's psychological world by instilling children's guilt and shame, love withdrawal and invalidation of children's desires and preferences (Barber, Stolz, & Olsen, 2005). Chinese parents commonly use this strategy to regulate children's obedience so as to follow family rules and avoid disgracing the family name (Shek, 2006b; Wang, Pomerantz, & Chen, 2007). Regarding parent-child conflict, it is defined as disagreement between parents and children, which may hamper adolescent well-being (Leung, Shek, Fung, & Leung, 2021; Bradford, Vaughn, & Barber, 2008).

### **Associations of Marital Quality with Parenting and Parent-child Relationship - Spillover Hypothesis versus Compensatory Hypothesis**

Two main hypotheses account for the inter-relationship between marital quality and parent-child relational qualities: the spillover hypothesis and the compensatory hypothesis (Erel & Burman, 1995). The spillover hypothesis posits that there is a direct transfer of mood or behaviour from one subsystem to another subsystem, where one's marital dissatisfaction may directly link to more negative parenting and poorer parent-child relationship (Erel & Burman, 1995; Katz & Woodin, 2002). Several mechanisms have been proposed to account for the spillover hypothesis. First, according to family systems theories (e.g., Minuchin, 1974), parents may distract their negative feelings from marital problems to focusing on children's behaviour by family processes such as "detouring" (i.e., parental alliance against their children; Coe et al., 2020) and "scapegoating" (i.e., blaming of the children for family conflicts; Yahav & Sharlin, 2002). These processes may reduce their tension from poor marital relationship but at the same time increase parental rejection of their children (Faubert, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990). Other mechanisms include children's learning of aggressive and hostile interactional patterns between parents through observation and

imitation (Harrist & Ainslie, 1998), inconsistent parenting due to poor communication between parents (Merrifield & Gamble, 2013; Sturge-Apple, Davies, Cicchetti, & Cummings, 2009), and stresses and role strain of parents (Chang, Lansford, Schwartz, & Farver, 2004). There is empirical support of the spillover hypothesis in accounting for the relationship between inter-parental conflict and negative parenting as well as poor parent-child relationships (Erel & Burman, 1995; Katz & Gottman, 1996; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Yoo, 2020). Empirical evidence also indicates a positive association between inter-parental conflict and psychological control (Stone, Buehler, & Barber, 2002).

In contrast to the spillover hypothesis, the compensatory hypothesis posits that an individual who experiences dissatisfaction in one family subsystem may have opposite behaviour in another subsystem to compensate for the loss in the dissatisfied subsystem (Erel & Burman, 1995). Thus, parents experiencing marital dissatisfaction may pay more attention to their children and build up cohesion with them to compensate for the damaged marital relationship (Nelson et al., 2009). According to family systems theories, the compensatory hypothesis is associated with “triangulation” and “cross-generational coalitions”, in which children ally with one parent to act against the other parent, resulting in an enmeshed relationship between children and their allied parent (Grych et al., 2004; Minuchin, 1974). There is evidence showing that parents were more involved and supportive to their children when they experienced negative marital relationship (Brenning et al., 2017; Villalobos, 2015).

### **Does Parent Gender Make a Difference?**

It is important to examine whether the spillover hypothesis or compensatory hypothesis will account for the associations of marital quality with parenting and parent-child relational qualities between fathers and mothers. Cumming and colleagues (Cummings, Merrilees, & George, 2010) proposed the “fathering vulnerability hypothesis”, which

suggests that fathers are more susceptible to stress and negativity from marital problems than are mothers. In contrast, as the roles of mother and wife are more distinct than those of father and husband (Ponnet et al., 2013), mothers are more capable to compartmentalize stresses from their different roles than are fathers (Cummings et al., 2010). As such, there are stronger associations of marital conflict with negative parenting and parent-child relationship for fathers than mothers (Cummings et al., 2010). Empirically, there is evidence that marital discord reinforces paternal control (Davies et al., 2009) and weakens paternal warmth (Schofield, Conger, Martin, Stockdale, Conger, & Widaman, 2009). Moreover, poor marital qualities also undermine father-child relationship because fathers tend to choose withdrawal and disengagement from their children in reaction to marital dissatisfaction than do mothers (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Lindsey et al., 2009).

As patriarchal hierarchy is emphasized in the Chinese culture (Chao & Tseng, 2002), the “fathering vulnerability hypothesis” is also applicable to the Chinese culture. As mentioned, poor marital relationship is regarded as a challenge that obstructs family solidarity and family reputations (Hwang, 2000). Besides, Chinese fathers are more vulnerable to stress and negativity when facing marital dissatisfaction (Cao et al., 2017) because they are more concerned about the reputation of themselves and the family (Ting & Chiu, 2002), which is associated with more negative fathering and poorer father-child relationship. Moreover, fathers may use psychological control to reinstate their undisputable authority in the family (Liu & Wang, 2015), particularly when they perceive that their position and power are challenged by their spouse. Previous studies lend support to the “fathering vulnerability hypothesis” in Chinese parents – while the association of father-perceived marital quality was significantly associated with poorer father-child relationship, the linkage between mother-perceived marital quality with mother-child relationship was non-significant (Shek, 2000).

On the contrary, the compensatory hypothesis is more commonly adopted by mothers (e.g., Belsky et al., 1991). Based on the sex role theory (Bem, 1974), women are more affective and caring in nature. When mothers perceive marital dissatisfaction, they may pay more attention in child-rearing in order to compensate for the dissatisfied marital relationship and protect their children from further harm. Furthermore, mothers are more likely to ally with their children to act against their spouse (i.e., cross-generational coalitions; Fosco & Grych, 2010). Previous studies have showed that mothers are more likely to compensate for children in the loss of paternal care (Belsky et al., 1991; Gao, Du, Davies, & Cummings, 2019; Villalobos, 2015). Hence, the compensatory hypothesis might account for the associations of mother-perceived marital dissatisfaction with more positive maternal parenting and better mother-child relationship.

### **Inter-spousal Association of Marital Dissatisfaction with Parenting and Parent-child Relationship**

While a vast majority of studies have simply used a single term of “parents” to indicate the views of both fathers and mothers (e.g., Grych et al., 2004), or examined the relationship between marital quality and child-rearing strategies at the individual level (e.g., Yoo, 2020), inter-spousal associations of marital quality with parenting and parent-child relationship are always neglected in the literature. However, based on family systems theories (e.g., Belsky et al., 1991), the family is an integral complex that family members are interdependent on each other. The interdependence between fathers and mothers in the linkages of one’s attributes with one’s own and spousal behaviour and wellbeing has been supported by research studies (Du, Luo, & Zhou, 2021; Kouros, Papp, Goeke-Morey, Cummings, 2014; Ponnet et al., 2013). Apart from the relationship between marital satisfaction and parenting strategies at the individual level, there is inter-spousal association of one’s marital satisfaction with his/her spouse’s parenting strategies (Gao et al., 2019;



Ponnet et al., 2013). Pedro and colleagues (Pedro, Ribeiro, & Shelton, 2012) pointed out that mutual support between parents is essential in achieving parental consistency in child-rearing practice. Thus, one's marital satisfaction may shape one's willingness to support the spouse, which may in turn mould the spouse's parenting practice (Merrifield & Gamble, 2013).

In general, parents facing marital dissatisfaction may react in two non-mutually exclusive ways: avoidance and attacking (Marchand & Hock, 2000). While avoidance involves keeping silent and having physical and psychological withdrawal from conflict (Christensen & Heavey, 1990), attacking encompasses physical and/or verbal assaults between parents (Marchand & Hock, 2000). With reference to avoidance communicative strategy, the "wife-demand, husband-withdraw" interactive pattern is commonly found where mothers act as "demanders" will give pressure to the spouse through emotional appeals, blames and complaints, whereas fathers react as "withdrawers" will retreat through silence, passivity and defensiveness (Christensen & Heavy, 1990; Uebelacker, Courtnage, & Whistman, 2003). Fathers' inactions and defensiveness may further trigger their spouse's hostility, leading to more negative mothering practice (Gao et al., 2019). At the same time, when mothers experience marital dissatisfaction, they may turn their emotional requests to their children for alliance against the spouse (Stone et al., 2002), which may weaken father-child relationship (Chan, 2009). It should be noted that "mother-demand, father-withdraw" pattern and "fathering vulnerability thesis" can co-exist. While the former focuses mainly on the maladaptive communication strategy within the marital subsystem, the latter emphasizes negative fathering within the father-child subsystem when fathers experience stress and negativity in the marital subsystem (i.e., fathers may withdraw from the marital subsystem but become aggressive in father-child subsystem). There is evidence supporting the "mother-demand, father-withdraw" hypothesis across different populations, including Chinese people (Christensen, Eldridge, Catta-Preta, Lim, & Santagata, 2006).

When parents use attack in expressing their marital dissatisfaction, they slander one another in their quarrels. Children are trapped into family triangulation (Franck & Buehler, 2007; Wang & Crane, 2001). Family triangulation refers to boundary violations that the children become entangled in parental disputes or even are torn between parents (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Franck & Buehler, 2007). Both parents may bring children into their quarrels by treating them as messengers between parents, and/or as confidantes or supporters against their spouse (Stone et al., 2002), which worsens the relationship between children and the spouse. Marchand and Hock (2000) identified that fathers used both avoidance and attack in facing marital dissatisfaction, while mothers mainly used attack in facing marital dissatisfaction.

In the Chinese culture where family harmony is emphasized (Yeh & Yang, 1997), “mother-demand, father-withdraw” pattern is more likely to happen among Chinese parents facing marital dissatisfaction (Lee et al., 2013). However, studies examining the interdependent associations of marital dissatisfaction with negative parenting and parent-child relationship are scarce, particularly in Chinese contexts.

### **The Present Study**

The present study examined the individual and inter-spousal associations of marital dissatisfaction with psychological control and parent-child conflict among Chinese families in Hong Kong. The use of actor-partner interdependence model (APIM) has facilitated the examination of individual and dyadic effects of one’s attributes on parental behaviour within the family (Jiang, Lin, Hinshaw, Chi, & Wu, 2020; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). An actor effect refers to the direct impact of one’s perceived marital dissatisfaction on one’s parenting practice and parent-child relationship, whereas a partner effect is the impact of one’s perceived marital dissatisfaction on the partner’s parenting practice and parent-child relationship (Fig. 1). Based on family systems theories (Belsky et al., 1991) and previous

research findings (Cummings et al., 2010; Villalobos, 2015; Wang & Crane, 2001), we proposed several hypotheses:

1. Based on the “spillover hypothesis” (Erel & Burman, 1995) and “fathering vulnerability hypothesis” (Cummings et al., 2010), we hypothesized that father-perceived marital dissatisfaction would be associated with stronger paternal psychological control (H1a) and greater father-child conflict (H1b).
2. Based on the “compensatory hypothesis” (Gao et al., 2019; Villalobos, 2015), we hypothesized that mother-perceived marital dissatisfaction would be associated with weaker maternal psychological control (H2a) and smaller mother-child conflict (H2b).
3. As fathers may use maladaptive communication strategies (e.g., avoidance) to handle marital dissatisfaction, which may trigger mothers’ aggressive parenting (Gao et al., 2019), it was hypothesized that father-perceived marital dissatisfaction would be associated with stronger maternal psychological control (H3a). Besides, as mothers may form coalitions with the children to act against their father (Stone et al., 2002), it was hypothesized that mother-perceived marital dissatisfaction would be associated with greater father-child conflict (H3b). However, as there is also the possibility that Chinese parents may use attack when facing marital dissatisfaction, which may provoke their spouse’s hostility, we also hypothesized that mother-perceived marital dissatisfaction would be associated with stronger paternal psychological control (H3c), and father-perceived marital dissatisfaction would be associated with greater mother-child conflict (H3d).

As data from multiple informants is a desirable approach to give an enriched account of the phenomenon (Day, Gavazzi, & Acock, 2001), we collected data of psychological

control and parent-child conflict from fathers, mothers and adolescent children in the present study.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

We sent invitation letters to youth service units and community service centres across Hong Kong to recruit participants for the study. Finally, 13 service units joined the study, and 386 intact families with adolescents aged between 12 and 18 were recruited from the community. The mean and median age of fathers were 48.74 ( $SD = 6.49$ ) and 48 (ranged from 35 to 76), those of mothers were 44.66 ( $SD = 5.22$ ) and 45 (ranged from 28 to 59) and those of adolescent children were 14.62 ( $SD = 1.67$ ) and 15 (ranged from 12 to 18), respectively. Among adolescent children, 205 (53.1%) were boys and 181 (46.9%) were girls. The monthly household income was diverse, with 84 (21.8%) families having monthly household income of HK\$20,000 (US\$2,564) and below, 205 (53.1%) had income between HK\$20,001 to HK\$60,000 (US\$2,565 – US\$7,693), and 97 (25.1%) had income above HK\$60,000 (US\$7,693).

### **Procedures**

During data collection, social workers invited intact families with adolescent children at the age between 12 and 18 from their membership or participant lists of their service units to join the study. In case the families had more than one adolescent child, the elder child was invited as he/she had better comprehension of the questionnaire. Trained research assistants or social workers contacted the respondents and introduced the aims and data collection procedures to the respondents, as well as their rights to voluntarily participate and withdraw from the research. Informed written consent from each respondent was obtained, and parents' written consent for their children's participation was also sought. While fathers and mothers were invited to fill out the Parent Questionnaire that contained measures of marital

satisfaction, psychological control, parent-child conflict and some demographic information (e.g., age, educational background, monthly household income etc.), adolescent children were invited to fill out the Adolescent Questionnaire that included measures of perceived paternal and maternal psychological control, and father-child and mother-child conflict. Each respondent filled out the questionnaire in a self-administrative format and returned it in a sealed envelope. The family received a HK\$150 (US\$19.2) supermarket coupon as compensation of their time and effort. The study was approved and monitored by the Human Subjects Ethics Sub-committee of an internationally recognized university.

## **Measurements**

### *Marital dissatisfaction*

*The Chinese version of the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (C-KMS).* Based on the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm et al., 1986), Shek and Tsang (1993) translated the measure into Chinese version and the measurement showed good psychometric properties in a Chinese sample in Hong Kong (Shek & Tsang, 1993). The scale consists of 3 items. A sample item is “How satisfied are you with your husband/wife as a spouse?” To assess marital dissatisfaction, we reversed the 7-point Likert scale of C-KMS, i.e., 1 = “very satisfied” and 7 = “very dissatisfied”. Higher mean scores indicate higher marital dissatisfaction. The scale showed excellent reliability in the study (Fathers:  $\alpha = .95$ ; Mothers:  $\alpha = .97$ ).

### *Psychological control*

*Chinese Paternal/Maternal Psychological Control Scale (PPSY/MPSY).* Based on the related literature (e.g., Barber, 2002), Shek (2006a) developed PPSY/MPSY and showed good psychometric properties in Chinese samples (Shek, 2006a). Each item is rated on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 6 = “strongly agree”. A sample item reads “If I fail to reach my father’s/mother’s standard, he/she will not pay any attention to me”. The parent version was modelled after the adolescent version of PPSY/MPSY. Higher mean

scores of the PPSY/MPSY represent higher levels of paternal/maternal psychological control. PPSY and MPSY showed good internal consistency in the study [PPSY:  $\alpha = 0.88$  (father report) and 0.84 (child report); MPSY:  $\alpha = 0.89$  (mother report) and 0.90 (child report)].

#### *Parent–child conflict*

*Father–Adolescent Conflict Scale (FAC) and Mother–Adolescent Conflict Scale (MAC).* Shek and colleagues (1995) translated the Conflict Behavior Questionnaire (Robin & Foster, 1989) into Chinese and validated the measurements in different Chinese samples (Shek, 1998a; 2002). A three-item short form was used in this study (Shek, 2002), rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 6 = “strongly agree”. A sample item reads “My father/mother and I always criticize or pick on each other.” The parent version was modelled after the adolescent version of FAC/MAC. Higher mean scores in FAC and MAC indicate higher levels of father–child and mother–child conflict, respectively. FAC and MAC showed good internal consistency in the study [FAC:  $\alpha = 0.90$  (father report) and 0.90 (child report); MPSY:  $\alpha = 0.92$  (mother report) and 0.92 (child report)].

#### **Data Analysis**

We adopted the Actor Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) using AMOS 26.0 to investigate the associations of father- and mother-perceived marital dissatisfaction with paternal and maternal psychological control, and father- and mother-child conflict in Chinese intact families, respectively (Fig. 1). Before analyses based on the APIM model, we tested the measurement model by performing confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the studied variables to ensure that the observed variables corresponded to the representing latent variable (Cole & Maxwell, 2003). The goodness-of-fit indicators suggested by Hu and Bentler (1999) were adopted, i.e., CFI > 0.90 and RMSEA < 0.06 indicated a good fit, and CFI > 0.90 and RMSEA < 0.08 showed an acceptable data fit. After confirming the factor structures of the latent variables, metric measurement invariance of the latent variables among family

members was assessed. The factor loadings of marital dissatisfaction, parent- and child-reported psychological control, parents' and children's perception of parent-child conflict were constrained to be equal across parent gender. We then compared the constrained and unconstrained model to assess whether there was significant difference. In case there was non-significant difference in chi-square values and change of CFI was smaller than .01 (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002), metric invariance of the variables across parent gender was supported.

After testing the measurement model, we tested the APIM model assessing the individual and inter-spousal associations of father- and mother-perceived marital dissatisfaction with paternal and maternal psychological control and father-child and mother-child conflict (Fig. 1). CFI > 0.90 and RMSEA < 0.06 indicated a good fit, and CFI > 0.90 and RMSEA < 0.08 showed an acceptable data fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

## **Results**

### **Preliminary Analyses**

We performed the Little's Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) test and found that the dataset was MCAR Data, with  $\chi^2 = 735.29$ ,  $df = 684$ ,  $p > .05$  (Enders, 2010). The skewness and kurtosis values of all studied variables were smaller than 2 and 7 respectively (Table 1; Curran, West & Finch, 1996). Full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation was used to handle the missing data (Arbuckle, 2007).

Correlational analyses showed that father-perceived marital dissatisfaction was positively related to father-child conflict (father and child reports), mother-child conflict (mother and child reports) and maternal psychological control (mother and child reports), whereas mother-perceived marital dissatisfaction was positively related to father-child conflict (father and child reports) and mother-reported mother-child conflict (Table 2). Moreover, boys showed higher psychological control and greater father-child conflict than

did girls, and mothers reported lower levels of mother-child conflict in families of lower income than those families of higher income (Table 2).

### **The Measurement Model**

By allowing the latent variables (father- and mother-perceived marital dissatisfaction, father-reported and child-reported paternal psychological control and father-child conflict, mother-reported and child-reported maternal psychological control and mother-child conflict) to freely associate with each other, confirmatory factor analysis was supported [ $\chi^2(771) = 1484.796, p < .001$ ; CFI = .943, RMSEA = .049 (90% CI [.045, .053]); Hu & Bentler, 1999]. The observed items fell into the corresponding latent variables, with factor loadings greater than .40 (Table 3). Furthermore, metric invariance of all studied variables across parent gender was also supported, with  $\Delta\chi^2(16) = 9.322, p > .05$  and  $\Delta\text{CFI} = .001$  (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002).

### **The Structural Model (The APIM)**

The APIM showed a good fit of the data, with CFI = .925 and RMSEA = .052, 90% CI [.049, .055]). Father-perceived marital dissatisfaction was positively associated with paternal psychological control ( $B [S.E.] = .12 [.05], \beta = .24, p < .05$ ;  $A_{F\text{-psy}}$ ) and maternal psychological control ( $B [S.E.] = .18 [.06], \beta = .27, p < .01$ ;  $P_{M\text{-psy}}$ ). H1a and H3a were supported (Fig. 2). However, mother-perceived marital dissatisfaction was neither related to maternal psychological control ( $B [S.E.] = -.06 [.05], \beta = -.09, p > .05$ ;  $A_{M\text{-psy}}$ ), nor to paternal psychological control ( $B [S.E.] = -.04 [.04], \beta = -.10, p > .05$ ;  $P_{F\text{-psy}}$ ) (Fig. 2). H2a and H3c were not supported.

Regarding father-child and mother-child conflict as dependent variables, the relationship between father-perceived marital dissatisfaction and father-child conflict was non-significant, with  $B (S.E.) = .04 (.04), \beta = .07 (p > .05; A_{F\text{-conflict}})$ . H1b was not supported. Besides, the relationship between mother-perceived marital dissatisfaction and mother-child



conflict was non-significant, with  $B (S.E.) = .04 (.04)$ ,  $\beta = .07$  ( $p > .05$ ;  $A_{M-conflict}$ ). H2b was not supported (Fig. 2). However, the association of father-perceived marital dissatisfaction with mother-child conflict was positive and significant, with  $B (S.E.) = .10 (.05)$ ,  $\beta = .19$  ( $p < .05$ ;  $P_{M-conflict}$ ), and the linkage between mother-perceived marital dissatisfaction with father-child conflict was also positive and significant,  $B (S.E.) = .09 (.04)$ ,  $\beta = .18$  ( $p < .05$ ;  $P_{F-conflict}$ ) (Fig. 2). H3b and H3d were supported. In summary, the relationship between marital dissatisfaction and parent-child conflict was not significant at the individual level (i.e., actor effect), but the relationship was positive and significant at the inter-spousal level (i.e., partner effect).

## **Discussion**

Although the associations of marital quality with parenting practice and parent-child relationship have attracted research attention (Erel & Burman, 1995; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000), studies examining inter-spousal linkages of marital dissatisfaction with parenting practice and parent-child relationship are scant, particularly in Chinese contexts. Furthermore, studies examining the interdependent relationship between marital dissatisfaction and psychological control across parent gender are almost non-existent. As such, the present study examined individual and inter-spousal associations of marital dissatisfaction with psychological control and parent-child conflict in Chinese families in Hong Kong. One methodological advance of the study is that fathers, mothers and adolescent children joined the study (i.e., collection of data from multiple sources).

### **Marital Dissatisfaction and Psychological Control**

The associations of father-perceived marital dissatisfaction with paternal and maternal psychological control were positive and significant, whereas the associations of mother-perceived marital dissatisfaction with paternal and maternal psychological control were non-significant. The findings support the “fathering vulnerability thesis” that fathers are more

susceptible to negativity and tension from marital dissatisfaction than are mothers (Cummings et al., 2010; Davies et al., 2009), resulting in using a more negative parenting practice (i.e., psychological control) in socializing their children. Moreover, as Chinese fathers are regarded as heads of the family and have vested power in the family (Chao & Tseng, 2002), they may consider their family status as undisputable. They are sensitive to poor marital relationship when they perceive that poor marital quality is a challenge to their position and authority in the family (Liu & Wang, 2015). Thus, they may use psychological control to make sure that their children obey them so as to uphold their overarching position in the family. Unfortunately, father-perceived marital dissatisfaction was also positively associated with maternal psychological control. Father's negativity and reactions on marital dissatisfaction will create tension to mothers. Being triggered by the spouse's stresses or hostility, mothers may use maternal psychological control to safeguard the children's obedience towards them and/or relieve their tension (Gao et al., 2019). Under this situation, "scapegoating" (Yahav & Sharlin, 2002) or "detouring" (Coe et al., 2020) may happen. As studies on father-perceived marital dissatisfaction, detouring, scapegoating, and maternal psychological control are almost non-existent in the Chinese context, future research on this area is suggested.

### **Marital Dissatisfaction and Parent-child Conflict**

Results showed that the associations of father- and mother-perceived marital dissatisfaction with father-child and mother-child conflict were not significant at the individual level, but the associations were positive and significant at the inter-spousal level. The findings provide some support for the phenomenon of family triangulation. In family triangulation, children are easily trapped in parents' conflictual interactions by acting as messengers between parents, as confidantes to attend to the problems of the other parent, or as associates to act against another parent (Stone et al., 2002). Under the "mother-demand,

father-withdraw” scenario, fathers’ withdrawal and defensiveness may push mothers turn to their children to act against their father (Chan, 2009; Peris, Goeke-Morey, Cummings, & Emery, 2008), which is linked to greater father-child conflict. However, the present findings showed that mother-perceived marital dissatisfaction was not associated with mother-child conflict. Besides, father-perceived marital dissatisfaction was associated with greater mother-child conflict. There is a possibility that parents use attack to handle their marital dissatisfaction (Marchand & Hock, 2000). Parents may slander each other in front of their children, attempting to hamper the relationship between the children and the spouse. Being “caught in the middle”, children may easily feel torn between divided loyalties (Amato & Afifi, 2006). Previous studies have shown that family triangulation would bring further disharmony to the family and risks of internalizing and externalizing of adolescent children (Buehler & Welsh, 2009; Grych et al., 2004; Wang & Crane, 2001).

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

There are several theoretical and practical implications of the study. Theoretically, the study illuminates the associations of marital dissatisfaction with one’s own and his/her spouse’s psychological control and parent-child conflict in Chinese families, which is pioneering in related research. The findings indicated that father-perceived marital dissatisfaction was positively related to paternal and maternal psychological control in Chinese families. On the contrary, mother-perceived marital dissatisfaction was not associated with both paternal and maternal psychological control. The results not only support the “fathering vulnerability hypothesis” (Cummings et al., 2010) that paternal stress from marital dissatisfaction may spillover into paternal psychological control, but also advance our knowledge in identifying the inter-spousal association of father-perceived marital dissatisfaction with maternal psychological control. Serving as dominant authority figures in Chinese families, fathers will become more intrusive in fathering and their hostility

will provoke their spouse's intrusive parenting when they experience marital dissatisfaction. Moreover, the associations of father- and mother- perceived marital quality with father-child and mother-child conflict were significantly positive at the inter-spousal level, but they were not significant at the individual level. The findings show some signs of family triangulation that each parent attempts to ruin the relationship between the child and the other parent when facing marital dissatisfaction. The study provides important theoretical insight on understanding how parent-perceived marital dissatisfaction is related to individual and spousal psychological control and parent-child conflict within Chinese families, which is important for enriching family systems theories applicable to the Chinese communities.

Practically, the study revealed the family dynamics within a family when facing marital dissatisfaction. Particularly, fathers are more susceptible to marital stress and practice more psychological control in their parenting. Besides, their perceptions of marital dissatisfaction may also provoke their spouse to practice psychological control. Unfortunately, fathers are more reluctant to disclose marital dissatisfaction and seek help from helping professionals (Shek, 1998b). The findings remind family practitioners to use a family-based intervention approach and encourage fathers to participate in family counselling. Moreover, children and adolescents are prone to greater psychological control and family triangulation when parents are facing marital dissatisfaction. Family practitioners and youth counsellors should be sensitive to children's and adolescents' emotions and behaviour and pay more attention to the dynamics and satisfaction of family relationships.

### **Limitations and Conclusion**

There are several limitations of the study. First, as a cross-sectional research design was adopted in the study, it has the inherent limitation to draw causal inference of the relationships. It is suggested that a longitudinal study should be conducted in future. Second, although the associations of marital dissatisfaction with psychological control and parent-

child conflict were identified between fathers and mothers, the mechanisms through which the relationships occur were unexplored. Hence, future research should investigate the mediating mechanisms (e.g., triangulation, detouring and scapegoating, marital distress, poor family communication etc.) through which the associations take place. Third, the study assumes gender role differences between fathers and mothers to account for the spillover hypothesis versus the compensatory hypothesis based on existing theories and research findings (Cummings et al., 2010; Ponnet et al., 2013). However, there is a need to assess gender role identification within Chinese families so that the explanation on the spillover hypothesis versus the compensatory hypothesis between fathers and mothers can be further substantiated (Cummings et al., 2010). Fourth, the study did not examine whether “mother-demand, father-withdraw” or “mutual attack” was the main communication strategy to handle marital dissatisfaction among Chinese parents in Hong Kong. As such, future studies examining these strategies may help researchers understand more the reactions of parents in facing marital dissatisfaction, and how these communication strategies would be linked to parenting practice and parent-child relationship. Lastly, the study only examined the associations of marital dissatisfaction with psychological control and parent-child conflict in Chinese families. As the findings cannot tell the differences of the studied relationships in Chinese and non-Chinese contexts, cross-cultural studies with both samples from Chinese and non-Chinese communities are encouraged in future. Moreover, the data were collected among Chinese families in Hong Kong. It is recommended to replicate the study in other Chinese communities (e.g., mainland China, Taiwan) and other non-Chinese contexts to improve generalizability of the findings.

Despite the limitations, the study contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating the associations of marital dissatisfaction with psychological control and parent-child conflict among Chinese families. Marriage and parenthood are important family

developmental stages that one may experience in their family life cycle. The present study identified the associations of father-perceived marital dissatisfaction with paternal and maternal psychological control, and inter-spousal associations of marital dissatisfaction with parent-child conflict among Chinese families in Hong Kong, which enrich our understanding about the interdependence of Chinese parents in the relationships between marital dissatisfaction and parent-child qualities in the existing social science literature.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Parent Gender	Variables	Range	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's Alpha
Paternal	Marital dissatisfaction	1-7	2.63	1.07	.82	1.96	.95
	Psychological control (Father report)	1-6	2.55	.85	.44	-.18	.87
	Psychological control (Child report)	1-6	2.30	.95	.72	.13	.88
	Father-child conflict (Father report)	1-6	2.67	1.07	.44	-.22	.90
	Child-father conflict (Child report)	1-6	2.73	1.07	.41	-.26	.90
Maternal	Marital dissatisfaction	1-7	2.89	1.22	.74	.56	.97
	Psychological control (Mother report)	1-6	2.50	.89	.51	.13	.89
	Psychological control (Child report)	1-6	2.62	1.06	.42	-.13	.90
	Mother-child conflict (Mother report)	1-6	2.80	1.20	.49	-.24	.92
	Child-mother conflict (Child report)	1-6	2.96	1.25	.32	-.38	.92

Table 2. Correlations of the measuring variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Fathers' perceived marital dissatisfaction	1.00											
2. Mothers' perceived marital dissatisfaction	.59***	1.00										
3. Paternal psychological control (Father report)	.09	-.01	1.00									
4. Paternal psychological control (Child report)	.09	.04	.28***	1.00								
5. Maternal psychological control (Mother report)	.14**	.04	.33***	.23***	1.00							
6. Maternal psychological control (Child report)	.13**	.04	.21***	.51***	.34***	1.00						
7. Father-child conflict (Father report)	.18***	.13*	.33***	.19***	.22***	.17**	1.00					
8. Father-child conflict (Child report)	.10*	.16**	.19***	.45***	.10*	.26***	.42***	1.00				
9. Mother-child conflict (Mother report)	.23***	.22***	.19***	.14**	.35***	.25***	.34***	.15**	1.00			
10. Mother-child conflict (Child report)	.14**	.09	.12*	.25***	.12*	.51***	.20***	.34***	.44***	1.00	-0.09	0.09
11. Adolescent gender	.02	.04	-.03	-.11*	-.03	-.07	-.11*	-.06	-.02	-.09	1.00	-0.04
12. Adolescent age	.00	-.05	-.05	-.05	-.04	.02	.00	.05	-.10	.09	-.04	1.00
13. Family monthly household income	-.01	-.09	.01	-.08	-.02	.03	-.09	-.07	-.10*	-.07	-.14**	-.14**

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table 3. Factor loadings of the latent variables

	Paternal		Maternal	
	Father report	Child report	Mother report	Child report
<u>Marital dissatisfaction</u>				
Item 1	.93	N.A.	.94	N.A.
Item 2	.92	N.A.	.95	N.A.
Item 3	.95	N.A.	.96	N.A.
<u>Psychological control</u>				
Item 1	.56	.60	.59	.71
Item 2	.62	.63	.65	.69
Item 3	.78	.80	.79	.85
Item 4	.82	.85	.84	.89
Item 5	.81	.88	.84	.86
Item 6	.73	.66	.77	.68
<u>Parent-child conflict</u>				
Item 1	.86	.89	.87	.92
Item 2	.94	.98	.95	.98
Item 3	.78	.79	.78	.81

Fig. 1. Hypothetical Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) of the associations of marital dissatisfaction with psychological control and parent-child conflict

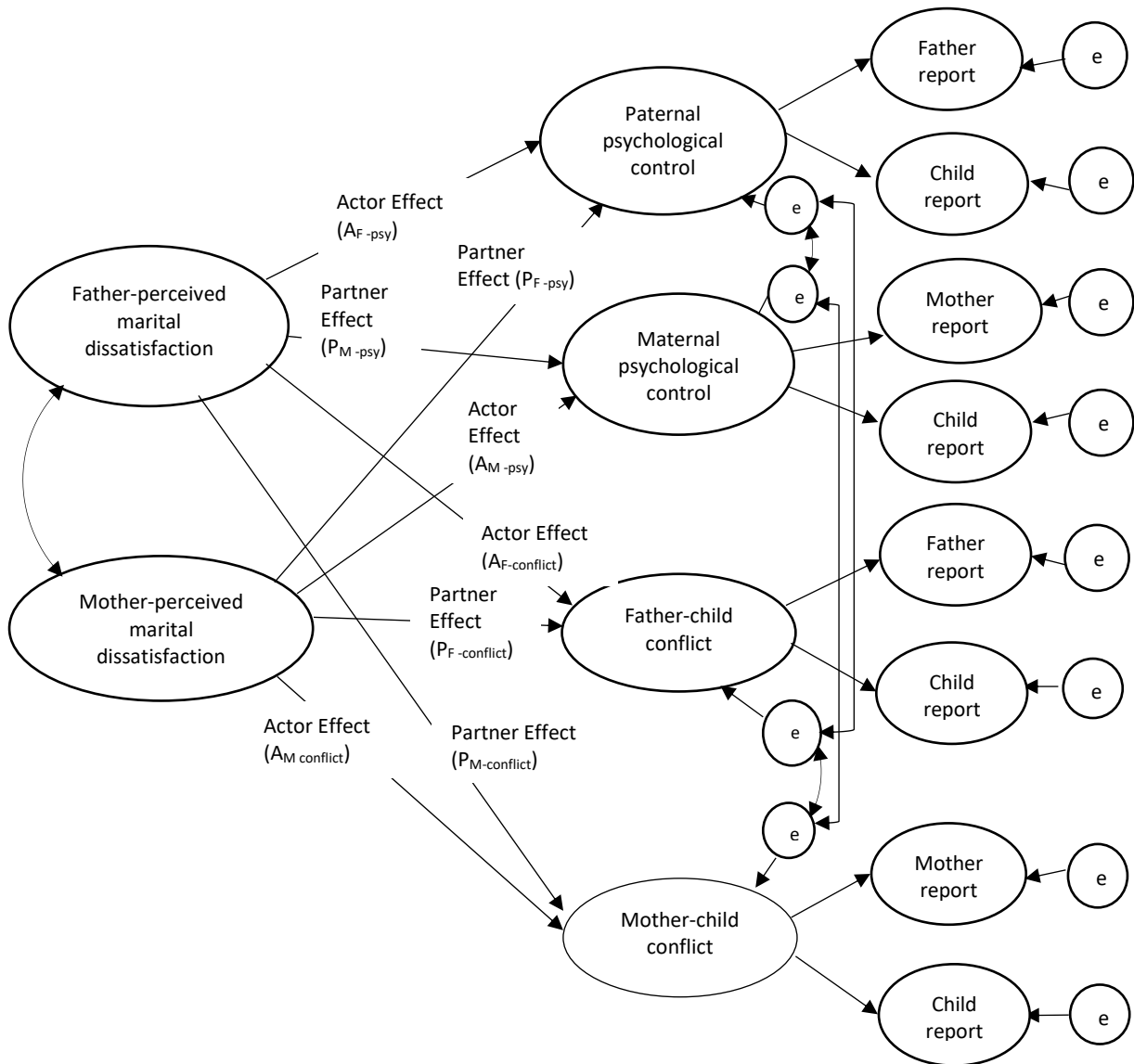
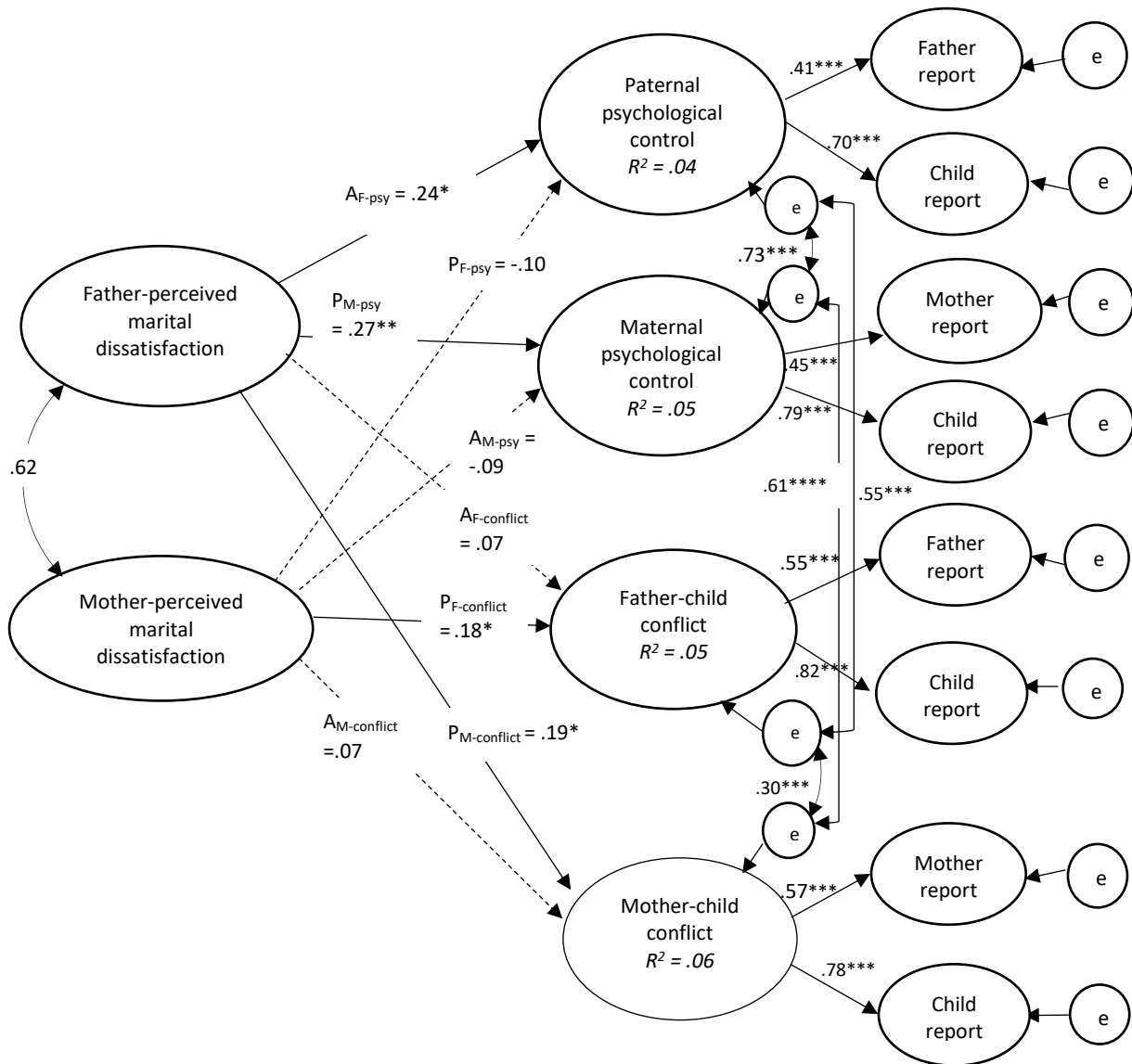


Fig. 2. Final Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) of the associations of marital dissatisfaction with psychological control and parent-child conflict



\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Note 1. Solid lines represent significant structural paths, dotted lines represent non-significant structural paths.

Note 2. Child's gender and age, and family income were controlled for.