

## Children's Perceived Agency in the Context of Marital Conflict: Relations With Marital Conflict Over Time

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Consistent with the bidirectional perspective on parent-child relations, the current study examined children's perceptions of agency in the context of marital conflict. A storytelling task was completed by 115 five-year-old children, tapping perceived agency. These children and their mothers and fathers completed measures of marital conflict at two time points. Consistent with clinical theory and research (e.g., Emery, 1989, 1999) and with theory about negative emotionality as related to children's motivation for agency (e.g., Davies & Cummings, 1994), destructive marital conflict predicted more negative child emotional reactivity, which predicted greater child perceived agency. By contrast, children's perceived agency at Time 1 was negatively related to marital conflict at Time 2. The results supported the hypothesis that children's perceived agency about marital conflict relates to reduced marital conflict over time, controlling for initial level of marital conflict. Implications for dynamic conceptualizations of children's agency from a family-wide perspective are discussed.

Recent research emphasizes the bidirectionality of parent-child relationships (E.M. Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000; Kuczynski, Harach, & Bernardini, 1999; Kuczynski, Marshall, & Schell, 1997; Lytton, 2000). Bell's (1968, 1971, 1979) emphasis on child effects represented a point of divergence from previous research on parent-child

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relations. Recent conceptualizations reflect increasing appreciation of the significance of the effects of the child on the parent (Kuczynski & Hildebrandt, 1997). Agency is defined as children's self-initiated, intentional responses to affect family members, a stronger assumption than bidirectionality with regard to children as agents of influence on family functioning. That is, agency posits that children make intentional responses or plans to affect the behavior of others.

The notion of children's perceptions of agency in the family has been little articulated (Maccoby, 1984), especially the ways in which children affect broader family functioning beyond parent-child relationships. Although recent work has begun to explore children as agents in parent-child interactions (Eisenberg et al., 1999; Holden, Thompson, Zambarano, & Marshall, 1997; Patterson, 1997; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989; Powers, Hauser, Schwartz, Noam, & Jacobson, 1983; Shaw & Bell, 1993; Stice & Barrera, 1995), suggesting causal effects of child behavior on parents, children's perceptions of agency in the context of marital conflict represent a largely unexplored area. In particular, longitudinal tests of children's efficacy in reducing marital conflict represent a gap in the literature.

The present article is concerned with children's perceived agency. Perceived agency is reflected in children's feelings, plans, or motivations to influence outcomes in the family. By comparison, agentic behavior refers to children's actions or behaviors to influence outcomes in the family (E. M. Cummings & Schermerhorn, 2003; Kuczynski et al., 1999). Perceived agency is an index of agency impulses in response to marital conflict. Agentic behavior represents agency performance, and it may be more subject to situational or other contextual influences (e.g., safety, opportunity to respond). The distinction between agentic behavior and perceived agency is similar to the distinction between performance and competence, or between behavior and impulses or cognitions about behaviors. Perceived agency may result in multiple outcomes that may directly or indirectly influence marital outcomes, including (a) suppression of urges for agentic behavior, with no behavioral indicators; (b) urges to mediate resulting in general expressions of concern or distress, including indicators of feeling of threat (e.g., leaving the room, covering ears), or taking the blame for marital problems; (c) urges to mediate resulting in responses indirectly reflecting agency impulses, including increases in "good behavior" or "good deeds"; distracting parents by becoming aggressive or disruptive; and (d) agentic behavior. Thus, perceived agency engages a wider range of reactions than agentic behavior, and thus may have stronger relations with marital conflict over time. Accordingly, perceived agency may provide

a particularly revealing window into the longitudinal implications of children's impulses to influence marital conflict, which may or may not be reflected in what children actually do when faced with interparental conflicts.

Several theoretical models predict that children's perceived agency about marital conflict increases as a function of exposure to marital conflict. Emery (1989) outlined a model for children's agency in response to interparental conflict. Initially, exposure to interparental conflict was posited to create distress for children, with more distress induced among children with greater histories of exposure to marital conflict. This distress then motivated children to respond in some way to attempt to relieve the distress, so that children from higher conflict backgrounds typically had greater perceived agency, that is, greater motivations, plans, or impulses to influence marital conflict. However, the resulting behavioral responses were seen as potentially maladaptive (e.g., distract parents by becoming disruptive or aggressive).

The emotional security hypothesis (Davies & Cummings, 1994) makes similar predictions, also providing further development of the conceptual underpinnings for children's involvement in marital conflict. That is, exposure to marital conflict is seen as increasing children's negative emotionality. Negative emotionality is conceptualized as reflecting emotional insecurity, with emotional insecurity, in turn, serving to motivate children's impulses to mediate or in other ways reduce exposure (e.g., avoid) to marital conflict (E. M. Cummings & Davies, 1996). Relatedly, impulses to regulate exposure to marital conflict are posited as a component process of emotional security as an organizational construct. For example, impulses toward mediation or avoidance (e.g., leaving room, covering ears) are indicators that the goal of preserving emotional security is activated and is also a means by which children respond toward maintaining or regaining that goal (Davies, Harold, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2002).

Thus, the study of perceived agency in response to marital conflict can be seen as a logical extension of hypotheses about children's responding to marital conflict made by the emotional security hypothesis. At the same time, perceived agency takes this work a step further by making explicit propositions about the child's self-initiated, intentional responding to marital conflict. Notably, studies of relations between histories of marital conflict and children's efforts to regulate exposure to marital conflict have yielded inconsistent results, which Davies, Harold, et al. (2002) suggested may be due to inconsistencies in the operationalization and assessment of children's reactions in this domain. Perceived agency, as opposed to agentic behavior, can be seen

to provide clearer tests of the theoretical assumptions of the emotional security hypothesis. That is, the theory posits that exposure to marital conflict activates children's dispositions to mediate or otherwise intervene (i.e., perceived agency), rather than that children are necessarily able and willing or feel sufficiently secure to engage in mediational responses (i.e., agentic behavior) (see related predictions by Crockenberg & Langrock, 2001; Emery, 1989; Grych & Fincham, 1990).

The present article tests several assumptions of theory in this area. First, *concurrently*, greater marital conflict is expected to predict children's greater perceived agency about marital conflict. This prediction is counterintuitive at first glance, since high conflict should make the prospect of any involvement more threatening and therefore less likely. By contrast, according to the emotional security hypothesis, children are highly motivated to maintain or regain emotional security, so that higher conflict should lead to greater perceived agency, despite (or because of) the elevated threat. Second, according to theory (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Emery, 1989), greater negative emotional reactivity is an initial reaction to marital conflict, which then motivates greater perceived agency. Thus, marital conflict should be related to negative emotional reactivity, which, in turn, should be linked with perceived agency. This theory-driven notion has never been directly tested in past work, but it has important implications for theory in this area (see related predictions by Crockenberg & Langrock, 2001; Wilson & Gottman, 1995).

Another gap addressed concerns whether children's agentic responses are effective in reducing marital conflict. According to the emotional security hypothesis, one might expect that children's agentic responses would be at least somewhat effective, given the purpose of maintaining or regaining emotional security. Thus, the predictions for relations between marital conflict and agency *longitudinally* are different than for the predictions *concurrently*. Despite the conceptual significance of this issue, both for the emotional security hypothesis and for understanding the longer-term meaning and implications of children's attempts to influence their parents' conflicts, there have been *no longitudinal tests* examining whether children's agency predicts marital conflict over time.

Despite the considerable attention paid to children's involvement in marital conflict and related notions (e.g., parentification) in the clinical literatures on divorce, marital conflict, and children (e.g., Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Emery, 1999), we know very little about the role of children's perceptions of agency in contexts of interparental conflict, with only a few studies assessing children's perceptions

of agency. For example, in a study of children's effects on maternal mood, Covell and Abramovitch (1987) found that the majority of children perceived themselves as being capable of altering their mother's mood, endorsing behavioral, gift-giving, and verbal strategies for altering maternal mood. As an additional example, another study examined family members' expectations regarding the effectiveness of child involvement in marital conflict as a function of age. When asked to rate the effectiveness of a variety of strategies to reduce parental anger in a hypothetical interparental conflict scenario, 4–9-year-olds were more likely than 10–12-year-olds to rate direct intervention in interparental conflict as effective (Covell & Miles, 1992). Parents of 4–6-year-olds were more likely to indicate that direct intervention would be effective in reducing interparental anger, compared with parents of 7–12-year-olds. However, beyond these few studies, which do not contextualize agency (e.g., in relation to histories of marital conflict), current knowledge of children's perceived agency in relation to marital conflict is surprisingly limited.

For the purposes of this report, two variables are combined into a single construct of perceived agency. Perceptions of *involvement* are concerned with children's representations of attempting to alter marital conflict, reflecting representations of responses designed to diminish or resolve the conflict (Davies, Forman, Rasi, & Stevens, 2002; J. S. Cummings, Pellegrini, Notarius, & Cummings, 1989). *Parentification* is reflected in the child's self-perceptions as an authority or doing something typically done by a parent; parentification reflects children's representations of acting intentionally in an adult-like role to change marital conflict (Byng-Hall, 2002; Davies, 2002). Both of these variables can be seen as being concerned with perceived agency and children's maintaining or regaining emotional security in contexts of marital conflict, although parentification, which is related to inappropriate role reversal in attachment research (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999), can be seen as a potentially more dysfunctional response strategy.

Although few past studies have examined perceived agency per se, several other constructs have been examined in the literature that share elements with perceived agency as a construct. Children's responses to marital conflict have been conceptualized as *coping* responses (O'Brien, Margolin, John, & Krueger, 1991). Agency and coping are not inconsistent; that is, definitions of both agency and coping involve "effortful behavior" (Kerig, 2001, p. 214). However, conceptualizing children's efforts to influence interparental conflict as agency makes stronger assumptions about the direction of effects (i.e., child-to-parent), which we contend is critical to appreciating children as dynamic participants

in contexts of marital conflict (E. M. Cummings & Schermerhorn, 2003).

Several studies connect children's perceived control with marital conflict. For example, El-Sheikh and Cummings (1992) reported that children who believed they had control over exposure to conflict experienced increased arousal and motivation to become involved in interparental conflict, compared with children who did not believe they had control over their exposure. Children who believe they can effectively manage their feelings of distress resulting from marital conflict exhibited fewer behavior problems, controlling for family stress level (Rossman & Rosenberg, 1992). Moreover, children's appraisals of (Kerig, 1998a, 1998b) and perceived control over (Kerig, 1998b) interparental conflict may ameliorate the effects of interparental conflict on children's adjustment. However, perceived control may concern a different array of responses (e.g., controlling one's own feelings), and the concept of control centers around managing, being in command of, and having power over. By contrast, the concept of agency centers around the individual as a catalyst and stimulus for change. That is, perceived agency reflects that children have impulses or plans for stimulating or effecting change in interparental conflict (e.g., to achieve greater emotional security), as opposed to the notion that children believe the marital relationship is within the child's control.

Thus, although involving relatively subtle differences, these constructs have important and different implications for models of children's dynamic motivation and plans in response to marital conflict. Moreover, we contend that perceived agency more effectively and clearly captures the spirit of the dynamic response processes outlined in current theory (e.g., the emotional security hypothesis), as well as better reflecting the fundamental nature of current notions about children's reciprocity in family relationships (E. M. Cummings & Schermerhorn, 2003).

Longitudinal studies are needed to test relations between children's perceptions of agency about marital conflict and level of marital conflict over time. The current study examines children's representations of themselves as agents in the family with respect to marital conflict as well as the relations between these representations and marital conflict over time. We obtained reports of marital conflict at Time 1 and Time 2 and of children's representations of agency regarding marital conflict at Time 1, allowing us to examine relations between child perceived agency and marital conflict over time. Past research indicates that children begin to mediate more in marital conflict by kindergarten, the age of the children in the present study (e.g., E. M. Cummings,

Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1984; J. S. Cummings et al., 1989), so it follows that perceived agency should be a relatively salient construct in children's reactions to marital conflict by this time.

Notably, the literature is inconsistent regarding gender differences in children's responding to interparental conflict, with no differences or mixed findings reported (Kerig, 2001; Davies & Lindsay, 2001). For example, although some studies have found that perceived marital conflict is related to more self-blame in girls (E. M. Cummings, Davies, & Simpson, 1994), other research has found higher levels of self-blame for interparental conflict in boys (Ulu & Fisiloglu, 2002). This study extends the study of gender differences to perceived agency.

Based on a dynamic perspective on children's agency in families (E. M. Cummings & Schermerhorn, 2003; Kuczynski et al., 1999), we hypothesize that children's perceptions of agency influence marital conflict, causing parents to reduce conflict, linking high levels of perceived agency at Time 1 with low levels of marital conflict at Time 2. Moreover, we hypothesize that children's perceptions of agency follow from heightened distress in response to marital conflict, consistent with a functionalist perspective on emotions (Campos, Mumme, Kermoian, & Campos, 1994) as well as current theory in the study of marital conflict and children (Crockenberg & Langrock, 2001; Davies, Harold, et al., 2002; Emery, 1989; Wilson & Gottman, 1995). A finding that children's perceived agency is related to reduced marital conflict over time would contradict the common wisdom that such responses by children are inevitably pointless or ineffective in altering marital functioning, indicating that children are truly dynamically agentic in the context of the marital relationship (E. M. Cummings & Schermerhorn, 2003).

## Methods

### *Sample and Procedures*

Participants were 115 kindergarten children (54 boys, 61 girls), their cohabiting parents, and their teachers in a midwestern town. The children had an average age of 6.14 years ( $SD = 0.49$  years). Seventy percent of children were European American, 15% were African American, 13% were biracial, and 2% were Hispanic. Based on U.S. Census Bureau information, the population by race/ethnicity in St. Joseph County in 2000 was 88% White, 8% Black, and 4% Hispanic ([www.stats.indiana.edu](http://www.stats.indiana.edu)). Thus, our sample was as ethnically/racially diverse as, or even slightly more diverse than, this community. Thirteen percent of families reported annual incomes below \$17,000, 24.5% of families



reported annual incomes between \$17,000 and \$40,000, and 62.3% of families reported annual incomes greater than \$40,000. Six percent of parents reported cohabiting for 3 years or fewer, 41% of families reported cohabiting for 3–10 years, and 53% of parents reported cohabiting for 10 years or longer.

Participants completed this study as part of a larger project. Families were recruited for the project via postcard mailings, through a sign-up booth at a local women's show, via letters sent to local kindergarten classrooms, and with referrals from other participating families. For example, of the families who received letters through the school systems, approximately 10% participated in the study. Although response rates were low, consistent with the relatively demanding requirements for participation in the larger study (two 2–3-hour laboratory visits each year involving multiple family members), efforts were made to obtain a sociodemographically diverse sample, including actively recruiting through school districts and community agencies and events tailored to samples of low socioeconomic status and high ethnic and racial diversity. Consistent with these efforts, our recruitment techniques yielded a sample that represents the ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic characteristics of the counties in which we sampled, that is, a representative community sample in these regards.

In addition, providing a basis for comparing this sample with other community samples on marital functioning, mothers and fathers reported their global marital satisfaction on the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959). The MAT is a widely used measure and has demonstrated good content and concurrent validity. Scores can range from 2 to 158, with scores below 100 suggesting marital distress (Crane, Allgood, Larson, & Griffin, 1990). In this sample, the mean marital satisfaction score for mothers was 110.11 ( $SD = 26.00$ , range = 33–154), and for fathers the mean was 100.55 ( $SD = 29.77$ , range = 17–157). Twenty-nine mothers (25.2%) and 47 fathers (41.2%) had MAT scores below 100, suggesting marital distress. Fifty-seven of the 115 couples (49.6%) contained at least one partner with a score below 100. Although the percentages of participants scoring in the distressed range are somewhat higher than those reported in other studies based on community samples, the average level of distress is comparable to that of other community samples (e.g., McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, Lauretti, & Rasmussen, 2000).

Sessions were completed in a laboratory setting and lasted approximately three hours. Parents were taken to separate rooms where they completed measures including questionnaires about demographic information, marital functioning, and other measures. Children com-



pleted questionnaires in a separate room with the assistance of a trained graduate student. Families completed two laboratory visits at each time point and were paid \$130 for their participation in the project. Data from four families were omitted because of parental divorce or separation occurring between Time 1 and Time 2.

### *Measures*

*Child representations of agency.* Children completed a revised version of the MacArthur Story Stem Battery (MSSB; Bretherton, Oppenheim, Buschsbaum, Emde, & The MacArthur Narrative Group, 1990). In the MSSB, which is a narrative storytelling task, each story is begun by the examiner and completed by the child. Family action figure dolls are used to facilitate storytelling.

Stories were introduced using the family action figures: a mother, father, and son or daughter matching the child's sex and ethnicity. The children were told they would be making up stories using the action figures. The examiner began each of the stories and instructed the children to use the figures to tell the rest of the story. The action figures were positioned to depict the story being told, and the examiner used different dramatic animated voices to involve the children as much as possible in the telling and development of the stories. Verbal prompts such as "Does anything else happen or is that the end of the story?" "What is Dad doing there?" "What's going to happen about your Mom and Dad's argument?" and "Who cleaned up the dishes?" were used to encourage the children to elaborate on and clarify their stories as needed. The children's storytelling was encouraged to continue until the main issue in the story stem was addressed. The narratives were videotaped for later coding.

The revised MSSB (E. M. Cummings, Davies, Goeke-Morey, & Shamir, 2001) was adapted to include stories depicting marital conflicts of varying intensities, aspects of parenting, and parent-child attachment. The parenting and attachment stories were not used for this report. The marital conflict stories include a mild conflict regarding a lost set of keys, an intense conflict regarding a messy kitchen, and a productive marital conflict with a calm discussion of one of the parents' returning home late (the Appendix contains the scripts for these story stems).

Emotional and behavioral responses were coded or scored as global representations of agency, reflected in responses of being an agent. Specifically, children's responses to the MSSB marital conflict stories were coded for both child involvement and parentification. Each code was

scored on a 7-point scale (1 = none, 7 = a lot). This coding system is similar to the coding system described in Kerig's (2001) work on coping.

Elevated scores on the involvement scale reflected stories that depicted the child figure mediating, and becoming involved in, the parents' conflict. A code of 1 reflected no child involvement, a code of 3 reflected a little involvement (e.g., attending to the conversation, looking up, and sighing), a code of 5 reflected some involvement (e.g., suggesting a solution, fixing the problem, bringing another family member into the conflict), a code of 7 reflected a great deal of involvement (e.g., telling the parents what to do) concurrent with more extreme concern, insecurity, and/or hostility on the part of the child figure, and codes of 2, 4, and 6 reflected midpoints in between those anchors. Stories with high scores on the involvement scale portrayed children attempting to directly alter marital conflict, reflecting representations of agentic behavior designed to diminish or resolve the conflict.

Children received high scores on the parentification scale for stories in which the child figure was depicted as an authority or doing something typically done by a parent. A code of 1 reflected no parentification, a code of 3 reflected a little parentification (e.g., one small instance of taking on a parent's role), a code of 5 reflected more substantial parentification or multiple occurrences of parentification (e.g., getting a Band-Aid for oneself in the absence of parental attention to the child's injury), a code of 7 reflected high levels of parentification (e.g., taking care of the parents, caring for themselves extensively, punishing the parents), and codes of 2, 4, and 6 reflected midpoints in between those anchors. In these stories, children's representations reflect a propensity to act intentionally in an adult-like role. These attempts to control the situation by regulating the parents reflect representations of agentic behavior.

As there were three marital conflict stories, codes were summed across the three stories to create a score for each child's involvement and parentification. Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s computed on 25% of responses were .97 for involvement and .89 for parentification.

*Children's negative emotional reactivity.* Children's negative emotional reactivity was also scored as a hypothesized predictor of perceived agency (e.g., Davies & Cummings, 1994). Negative emotional reactivity was operationalized in terms of the child figure showing emotional distress (e.g., sadness, fear, and/or anger). A code of 1 reflected no emotional reactivity, a code of 3 reflected a little emotional reactivity (e.g., a few instances of low intensity displays of anger, sadness, or fear), a code of 5 reflected some emotional reactivity (e.g., moderate intensity of one, or low intensity of more than one, negative emotion),

a code of 7 reflected high emotional reactivity (e.g., crying, intense emotional expression that lasts for a long time), and codes of 2, 4, and 6 reflected midpoints in between those anchors. As there were three marital conflict stories, codes were summed across the three stories to create a score for each child's negative emotional reactivity. Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s computed on 25% of responses was .84 for negative emotional reactivity.

*Time 1 and Time 2 marital conflict.* Mothers and fathers completed the 10-item O'Leary Porter Scale (OPS; Porter & O'Leary, 1980), assessing children's exposure to overt hostility between the parents during Time 1 and Time 2. The OPS is a self-report measure consisting of 10 items. Answers are indicated on a 5-point scale (0 = never, 4 = very often). Porter and O'Leary reported a test-retest reliability coefficient of .96 and good convergent validity. Mothers' and fathers' respective Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s in this sample were .81 and .76 for Time 1 and .82 and .82 for Time 2.

Both parents also completed the 2-item Frequency/Severity subscale of the Conflicts and Problem-Solving Scales (CPS; Kerig, 1996) during Time 1 and Time 2, rating the frequency and severity of conflict. For the Frequency/Severity subscale, parents completed 2 items, indicating their responses on a 4-point scale (0 = never, 3 = often). Kerig reported moderate test-retest reliability and good convergent and discriminant validity. Mothers' and fathers' respective Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s in this sample were .72 and .72 for Time 1 and .72 and .75 for Time 2.

Children completed the Children's Perceptions of Interparental Conflict-For Young Children (CPIC-Y; Grych, 2000) during Time 1 and Time 2. The scale consists of 34 items, each of which is answered "yes" or "no." The 11-item Conflict Properties subscale provided a child-report measure of marital conflict. This subscale has demonstrated good reliability, with a coefficient  $\alpha$  of .77 (J. H. Grych, personal communication, July 3, 2002). Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s in this sample for Time 1 and Time 2, respectively, were .65 and .67.

## Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables. The child perceived agency variables correlate positively with one another, as do the Time 1 and Time 2 marital conflict variables, respectively. These moderate to high correlations supported construction of the latent variables of interest. In addition, the marital conflict variables show strong intercorrelations with one another from Time 1 to Time

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations for Indicator Variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
Child perceived agency													
1. INV	—												
2. PAR	0.76**	—											
Negative emotional reactivity													
3. NER	0.46**	0.45**	—										
Time 1 marital conflict													
4. Mother OPS	0.11	0.17	0.20*	—									
5. Father OPS	-0.03	-0.03	0.13	0.59**	—								
6. Mother FRE	0.25**	0.23*	0.29**	0.60**	0.34**	—							
7. Father FRE	0.09	0.20*	0.16	0.48**	0.60**	0.42**	—						
8. Child CP	0.18	0.23*	0.44**	0.38**	0.27**	0.16†	0.24*	—					
Time 2 marital conflict													
9. Mother OPS	-0.05	-0.02	0.04	0.78**	0.64**	0.43**	0.54**	0.26**	—				
10. Father OPS	-0.05	-0.03	0.16	0.54**	0.77*	0.26**	0.52**	0.27**	0.68**	—			
11. Mother FRE	-0.01	-0.04	0.01	0.50**	0.44**	0.60**	0.48**	0.17	0.62**	0.48**	—		
12. Father FRE	-0.03	0.12	0.05	0.41**	0.55**	0.30**	0.73**	0.19†	0.60**	0.62**	0.47**	—	
13. Child CP	-0.02	0.05	0.09	0.37**	0.33**	0.16	0.21*	0.35**	0.43**	0.45**	0.30**	0.39**	—
M	7.12	5.04	4.18	10.42	10.66	8.50	8.43	4.36	9.61	10.40	8.69	8.29	3.70
SD	4.15	3.66	2.54	5.41	4.81	2.90	3.26	2.38	4.96	4.88	3.12	3.10	2.23

Note. Ns range from 101 to 115 due to missing data. INV = involvement (Cummings et al., 2001); PAR = parentification (Cummings et al., 2001); NER = negative emotional reactivity (Cummings et al., 2001); OPS = O'Leary-Porter Scale (Porter & O'Leary, 1980); FRE = Frequency/Severity subscale of the Conflicts and Problem-Solving Scales (Kerig, 1996); CP = Conflict Properties subscale of the Children's Perceptions of Interparental Conflict-For Young Children (Grych, 2000).

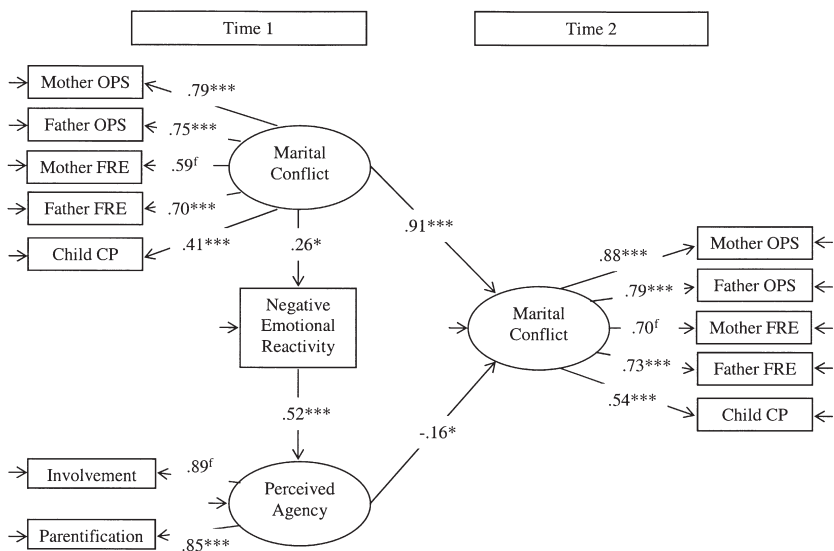
\*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. †p < .10.

2, reflecting substantial stability in these variables over time, which was expected given the psychometric construction of these scales.

We first conducted a *t* test to examine possible gender differences in the prevalence of perceived agency. We tested for differences between boys and girls in MSSB scores on involvement and parentification. No significant gender differences were found for either of the perceived agency constructs.

We then tested relations between marital conflict and children's negative emotional reactivity, and children's negative emotional reactivity and agency, to test propositions derived from the emotional security hypothesis about dynamic relations among marital conflict, negative emotional reactivity, and perceived agency. To test the effects of children's perceived agency in the context of marital conflict on subsequent marital conflict, structural equation modeling was used. The structural equation modeling analyses of this study were conducted using Analysis of Moment Structures (Amos, v. 4.01; Arbuckle & Wothke, 1999), a computer software package that utilizes the full information maximum likelihood approach to handling missing data. Maternal and paternal reports of marital conflict were analyzed as indicator variables within the same model. We permitted intercorrelations between the same indicators completed by the same participants at different time points.

Consistent with our expectations regarding the interrelationships among marital conflict, perceived agency, and negative emotional reactivity, we tested a model in which Time 1 marital conflict predicts Time 1 negative emotional reactivity, which, in turn predicts Time 1 perceived agency. We also included paths from Time 1 marital conflict and Time 1 perceived agency to Time 2 marital conflict. Results indicated that Time 1 marital conflict predicted Time 1 negative emotional reactivity,  $\beta = 0.26, p < .05$ , Time 1 negative emotional reactivity predicted perceived agency,  $\beta = 0.52, p < .001$ , and Time 1 marital conflict predicted Time 2 marital conflict,  $\beta = .91, p < .001$  (see Figure 1). The path from Time 1 perceived agency to Time 2 marital conflict was also significant,  $\beta = -0.16, p < .05$ , and the model demonstrated a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2 [57, N = 115] = 97.69, p = 0.001, \chi^2/df = 1.71, NFI = .97, CFI = .99, RMSEA = 0.079, RMSEA 90\% CI = .05-.11$ . This finding is consistent with our conceptualization of marital conflict predicting high levels of negative emotional reactivity, with negative emotional reactivity, in turn, predicting high levels of perceived agency, and per-



**Figure 1.** Structural model testing the effects of marital conflict, negative emotional reactivity, and perceived agency. An *f* superscript indicates a fixed loading for model estimation purposes. Values of error variances of indicator variables (i.e., small arrows) are not shown. Latent constructs are enclosed in ovals, and observed variables are enclosed in boxes.

ceived agency predicting low levels of subsequent marital conflict, controlling for initial levels of marital conflict.

*Child gender as moderator.* Child gender was tested as a moderator using stacked modeling procedures (e.g., Grych, Harold, & Miles, 2003). We compared  $\chi^2$  statistics that assess the fit of two competing models, one that constrains pathways to be equal across genders and one that allows paths in each subgroup to freely vary. The resultant  $\chi^2$  difference statistics provide estimates of statistical significance of any gender differences in the pathways. In the current study, the direct pathways model did not differ across girls and boys ( $\chi^2_{\text{diff}} = 6.52$ ,  $df_{\text{diff}} = 4$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Accordingly, we ran the more parsimonious model tests on the entire sample and presented only the results from those analyses here.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The present article moves the field forward by advancing several key theory-driven propositions regarding dynamic and reciprocal relations between children and marital systems in the family (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Emery, 1989). Taken together, these findings advance the

perspective that children are not simply passive recipients of the negative impact of exposure to marital conflict but rather are active agents in the context of marital conflict, responding dynamically, and to some modest degree effectively, over time to the threat of marital conflict.

First, one finding was that children's perceived agency was more elevated in families with high marital conflict. This result supports the notion that maintaining or regaining emotional security is an important goal for children in families, which becomes ascendant in the face of marital conflict, consistent with themes of attachment theory regarding the salience of emotional security issues in times of threat or stress (Bowlby, 1969). By contrast, a commonsense perspective is that heightened marital conflict would diminish the likelihood of children's motivation, plans, or desire for involvement. Moreover, as we have shown, perceived agency is theoretically more relevant and interesting than agentic behavior as a direct test of the propositions of current theory (e.g., the emotional security hypothesis). Notably, although results are mixed, findings based on agentic behavior also support relations between heightened agency and elevated marital conflict (E. M. Cummings & Davies, 2002), although a gap in analyses of relations between agentic behavior and marital conflict over time.

Second, negative emotional reactivity to marital conflict was related to both concurrent marital conflict and children's perceived agency. These findings are consistent with the notion that children's negative emotional reactions are activated by marital conflict, which then serves to motivate perceived agency (Davies & Cummings, 1994). These analyses thus support broader propositions of current theory regarding marital conflict and perceived agency—in particular, propositions regarding the role of emotional processes in response to marital conflict. These findings are also consistent with a functionalist perspective on emotions, with emotions posited as significant internal monitoring and guidance systems with the function of appraising events and motivating human behavior (Bretherton, Fritz, Zahn-Waxler, and Ridgeway, 1986; Campos, Campos, & Barrett, 1989; Cole, Michel, & Teti, 1994).

Third, in longitudinal tests, children's perceived agency predicted reduced marital conflict, supporting the notion that children's agency is dynamically related to marital conflict over time, contrary to the common wisdom that children are simply helpless bystanders to marital conflict. There are multiple possible interpretations for these results. Given that planning is the first step toward behavioral responding, marital conflict may be reduced over time because children followed up with active efforts at intervention. However, the explanation may require a broader



notion of how children's reactions affect parents than simply the quality of their mediational strategies. More likely, parents are affected by being made aware of children's concerns about the parents' conflicts, which may be due to intervention behaviors but may also be a function of children's obvious concern, expressed in a variety of ways. In a general sense, beyond agentic behavior *per se*, parents are likely to be sensitive to their children's indications that their conflict is too intense, and it may be this combination of responses that accounts for decreases in subsequent levels of marital conflict. Notably, children's perceived agency may be linked with a wide range of responses, including a variety of responses other than simply mediation (e.g., anxious cleaning up of the home; doing chores for the parents; giving parents concerned or anxious looks; expressions of threat or self-blame).

That is, consistent with the notion of bidirectional relations, parents might intentionally reduce marital conflict, because of their children's signals of difficulty and the parents' consequent increased understanding that child exposure to marital conflict has negative consequences. In a sample of clinic-referred children and their families, Mahoney, Boggio, and Jouriles (1996) found that mother-to-child empathic statements were greater following a conflictual marital discussion not witnessed by the child, compared with statements following a nonconflictual marital discussion. Mahoney et al. suggested that mothers' increased empathy might reflect their desire to protect their children from marital conflict, whereas when children witness marital conflict, a more immediate need to help children manage their responses to marital conflict replaces this increased empathy. Although it is too early to know whether perceived agency will outperform tests of agentic behavior in supporting these theoretical propositions, if this result does follow, it may reflect that perceived agency sets in motion a broader net of responses that affect parents than simply agentic behavior *per se*. Moreover, it remains an open question whether agentic behavior as such results in decreased marital conflict over time, or whether agentic behavior and perceived agency have independent, and possibly additive, effects in reducing marital conflict over time.

A potential concern is the seeming inconsistency between the zero-order correlations presented in Table 1 and the results of the structural equation model. Specifically, as shown in Table 1, perceived agency is correlated with Time 1 marital conflict but not with Time 2 marital conflict. The primary reason that perceived agency at Time 1 does not correlate with Time 2 marital conflict is because (a) Time 1 perceived agency relates positively to Time 1 marital conflict through negative

emotional reactivity, and (b) the SEM results show that Time 1 perceived agency has a negative effect on Time 2 marital conflict, controlling for Time 1 marital conflict. The zero-order correlations between Time 1 perceived agency and Time 2 marital conflict are close to zero because the initial positive link between perceived agency and marital conflict at Time 1 is canceled out by the negative effect of Time 1 perceived agency on Time 2 marital conflict. If the SEM path from perceived agency to Time 2 marital conflict were actually zero, then the bivariate correlations between perceived agency and Time 2 marital conflict would be positive. The creation of more rigorous constructs, including removal of measurement error, in structural equation modeling further accounts for the apparent discrepancy between the correlations presented in Table 1 and the results of the structural equation modeling. Notably, the high stability coefficients for the marital conflict instruments limited the potential for detecting influence on marital conflict over time; the relatively modest size of the finding for child perceived agency should be evaluated taking into account this statistical context.

The processes underlying these relationships merit further investigation. By examining, first, whether children's representations of agency are linked with higher concurrent levels of marital conflict through negative emotional reactivity, and second, whether children's representations of agency with regard to marital conflict predict change in marital conflict over time, the current study represents a first step toward testing these notions. Our assessment of perceived agency taps children's representations of their responses to marital conflict, but it does not capture the degree to which this response is an effort to effect a change in parental conflict. In addition, it remains possible that a third variable is responsible for both children's agentic beliefs in the face of interparental conflict and reductions in interparental conflict over time. For example, perhaps parents respond entirely to their children's distress, refraining from pathologically triangulating their children in their conflict, and diminishing subsequent conflict with their spouses.

Several limitations of the current study merit discussion. First, the sample consisted of a representative community sample. Ethical guidelines require that families are free to offer or withdraw from their participation as they see fit. Given these guidelines, targeting areas with racial and economic diversity is an ethical approach to obtaining a representative community sample that optimizes the generalizability of the findings. Notably, negative relations between children's perceived agency and marital conflict over time may not be obtained in clinical samples, sam-

ples of divorcing families, or other high-risk groups. That is, the effectiveness of whatever mechanism(s) underlies these effects may not hold for families with highly escalated interparental conflicts or for parents with serious adjustment problems, which may reduce their awareness of their children's feelings, communications, or actions. Regarding the lack of findings based on child gender, our sample may have been too small to reveal any gender differences in relations between perceived agency and marital conflict. Future research should test this model with more diverse samples to determine whether the results generalize to other populations, and should examine gender differences in relationships between these constructs utilizing a larger sample.

In addition, because examination of child perceived agency in the context of marital conflict is in its early stages, there is a need for more conceptual treatment and operationalization of agency in the context of marital conflict. In addition, Dunn (1997) also highlighted the need for examination of bidirectionality over time, particularly in terms of stability of differences between dyads over time in the balance of control. Research should examine the continuity of individual differences in these dispositions over time, and the implications of agency processes for parent-child and other family relationships across time and contexts.

In summary, research has typically focused on parents' effects on their children, without also examining the effects children have on their parents. When child agency has been examined, tests have been limited to the parent-child subsystem. As we outlined at the outset, in order to more fully understand parents, children, and parent-child relations, it is crucial to utilize a broad, process-oriented approach to research in the family. An adequate explanatory model of the development of children and parents must explore multiple domains of influence, including subsystems beyond the parent-child subsystem. The current study highlights the value of utilizing a bidirectional model of family-wide relationships, including children and marital relations. A gap has been the lack of systematic study of the implications of children's plans, motivations, or behaviors to influence the family for their own development over time and in the context of family relationships. Although the present findings support a family-wide perspective, many questions remain unanswered about the processes and dimensions by which parents and children develop in the context of each other's influence in the family. In particular, examination of the influence of children's agentic behavior on the marital relationship, and of links between child agency and mental health, represent fertile ground for future work.

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## Appendix: Revised MacArthur Story Stem Battery: Marital Conflict Stories

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### 1. Lost Keys

Setting: *This is a mild argument, and parents speak with an agitated, moderate level of anger. Underlined words are emphasized slightly.*

Father: I can't find my keys. Where did you put them?

Mother: I didn't touch your keys. It's not my responsibility to keep track of them.

Father: You're always borrowing them and not putting them back!

Mother: No, I'm not. If you put them where they were supposed to go in the first place they wouldn't get lost.

### 2. Messy Kitchen

Setting: *This is an intense conflict. Both parents raise their voices and use angry tones of voice. The dolls stomp their feet when they say their lines. Underlined words are emphasized strongly.*

Interviewer: Mom and Dad are really mad. Look at my face. {*Experimenter makes an angry, scrunched up face, and maintains it throughout the story. Experimenter speaks in a very serious, annoyed, irritated, and defensive voice.*}

Mother: Look at this mess! There are dirty dishes in the sink and melted ice cream all over the table! Why can't you clean up after yourself?!"

Father: Me clean up! It's your turn! I cleaned the kitchen last week!"

Mother: No, this is your mess! You're the one who left the ice cream out. Because of you it melted all over the table!

Father: You said you were going to put the ice cream away . . . it's your fault it melted!

### 3. Home Late

Setting: *This is a productive marital conflict, with calm discussion. The parents do not raise their voices; they use a calm, neutral tone of voice.*

Father to child: I wonder when Mom is going to be home for dinner? I'm getting really hungry. {*Experimenter brings mother in.*}

Father to mother: Hi, I thought you'd be home earlier.

Mother: I told you I might be back late.

Father: Yes, but you said 6:30, and it's almost 7:00.

Mother: Well, things took longer than I expected.