

RESEARCH

Context matters: Longitudinal associations between marital relationships and sibling relationships in Black families

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Abstract

Objective and Background: Sibling relationship qualities have been linked to parents' marital dynamics, but we know little about the contextual conditions underlying these linkages. We examined longitudinal associations between parents' reports of their marital satisfaction and conflict and siblings' reports of warmth and conflict and tested whether these associations varied by family economic strain, neighborhood economic disadvantage, and parent and youth gender.

Method: Data were collected in three annual home interviews with mothers and fathers and two adolescent siblings from 185 Black families.

Results: Results from multilevel models showed that associations between mothers' and fathers' marital and youth's sibling relationship varied according to neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage, family economic strain, and youth gender. For example, consistent with a spillover model, on occasions when parents reported more marital conflict than usual, youth reported less sibling positivity, but only when parents also experienced less economic strain than usual. Supporting a compensation hypothesis, on occasions when parents reported more marital conflict than usual, boys reported more sibling positivity.

Conclusions: Results provide new insights into family systems processes in an understudied group, including the role of contextual factors and youth gender in shaping those processes.

Implications: Researchers and practitioners should consider multiple family relationship dynamics and the larger family contexts in which these relationships take place to better understand youth relational adjustment.

KEYWORDS

Black American families, economic strain, marital quality, neighborhood economic disadvantage, siblings

Sibling relationships provide an avenue for social, emotional, and cognitive development and are an important source of influence in Black American families (Brody & Murry, 2001; McHale et al., 2012; Whiteman et al., 2011, 2015). Sibling relationship qualities also vary over time and between families, and this heterogeneity is tied to other family relationship dynamics. In particular, parents' marital interactions have been described as a model for interpersonal relationships that set the tone for sibling interactions (Dunn et al., 1999). From a family systems perspective, the marital and sibling subsystems are interdependent (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1988). Most studies show congruent patterns linking marital disharmony and sibling relationship difficulties; others show positive *spillover* between marital harmony and sibling closeness, in which the qualities of one relationship are mirrored in another relationship (Kim et al., 2006; O'Connor et al., 1998; Stocker et al., 1997; Stocker & Youngblade, 1999; Yu & Gamble, 2008). In contrast to such spillover patterns, a *compensation* hypothesis holds that individuals may make up for one poor relationship by investing in another (Erel & Burman, 1995). Indeed, some findings are consistent with a compensation pattern in documenting close sibling relationships in the face of marital disharmony (Kim et al., 2006; O'Connor et al. 1998; Sheehan et al., 2004). Still other studies have found no significant associations linking marital and sibling relationships (Dawson et al., 2015; Ruff et al., 2018).

In an effort to resolve these inconsistencies, in this study, we examined potential moderators of marital–sibling relationship linkages. First, we tested whether two contextual conditions, family economic strain and neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage, conditioned the associations between parents' reports of marital satisfaction and conflict and siblings' reports of positivity and conflict in their relationships. Among Black Americans, family economic strain and neighborhood disadvantage may be sources of significant stress, including that due to historical and present-day systemic and personal discrimination and racism (Murry et al., 2018). Second, we examined both mothers' and fathers' marital relationship reports and tested whether parent or youth gender moderated marital–sibling relationship linkages. Prior work documents that gender is central in the organization of family dynamics, and although mothers' and fathers' marital experiences have proven to have different implications for youth adjustment (Kim et al., 2006; Lam et al., 2012), most prior studies of Black families, in particular, have failed to include fathers or test the implications of mothers' and fathers' marital experiences for sons and daughters. Identifying such moderators of family subsystem linkages can advance understanding of family systems processes, and findings may have implications for targeted family prevention and intervention efforts.

Beyond the potential effects of moderators, inconsistencies in findings regarding associations between marital and sibling relationships may stem from methodological factors. First, prior studies vary in their focus on positive versus negative dimensions of parents' marital relationships. Marital satisfaction and conflict may be differentially salient and influential to adolescents including because satisfaction targets parents' internal states, whereas conflict is more overt and thus likely to be more visible and salient to youth. Consistent with this idea, previous studies have shown that overt parental behaviors are more consistently linked to sibling relationship experiences than are parents' underlying attitudes (Dawson et al., 2015). Accordingly, in this study, we assessed both marital conflict and satisfaction and examined their linkages to sibling conflict and positivity.

We also expanded on prior research by studying these processes in a sample of Black American families, a group that has been relatively neglected in both sibling and marital relationship research. Although 33% of Black children under the age of 18 reside in two parent-households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), current scholarship on Black families focuses primarily on youth in single parent families. Some scholars have argued that the extended family orientation among Blacks may limit interdependencies between couple relationship dynamics and parent–child relationships (McLoyd et al., 2001) as evidenced in the limited research on

marital–parent–child relationship linkages in this sociocultural group (Skinner et al., 2021; Zvara et al., 2015). In this study, in an effort to contribute to the literature on family systems processes, we tested whether such a pattern would emerge for the links between marital and sibling relationships in Black American families.

LINKAGES BETWEEN MARITAL RELATIONSHIP AND SIBLING RELATIONSHIP

As noted, a family systems perspective holds that family members are interdependent such that behaviors and experiences of one individual or subsystem have implications for those of others (Minuchin, 1988). In the case of marital–sibling relationship linkages, interdependencies may emerge because marital dynamics create a family climate that either disrupts or facilitates children’s self-regulation capacities (Dunn et al., 1999; Stocker et al., 1997; Stocker & Youngblade, 1999). According to a spillover hypothesis, parents’ marital experiences will be mirrored or replicated in sibling relationships such that positive marital qualities will be associated with positive sibling relationships, and marital problems will be associated with sibling relationship difficulties. From a social learning theory perspective, such linkages emerge when children model their parents’ behaviors (Bandura, 1969).

There is substantial support for the spillover hypothesis from studies of adolescents. For example, O’Connor et al. (1998) used cluster analyses with a sample of White adolescents and found a cluster wherein parents reported disharmony in their marital relationships and youth reported problematic sibling relationships. In another study of majority White families, fathers’ reports of marital conflict were associated concurrently with more sibling hostility, but neither mothers’ nor fathers’ marital conflict reports were related to sibling affection or to changes in sibling relationships over time (Ruff et al., 2018). Another study used the analytic approach we applied in the present study to show in a sample of White families that mothers’ but not fathers’ experiences of marital love were positively related to adolescent siblings’ intimacy (Kim et al., 2006). In short, studies of majority White families suggest that in adolescence, spillover between marital and sibling relationships—both negative and positive—is evident but may vary according to the relationship domain under investigation and parents’ gender. We built on this work to test longitudinal, within-family associations between these two family subsystems in an understudied racial group.

In contrast to the spillover hypothesis, the compensation hypothesis, derived from family systems theory’s concept of family coalitions, suggests that individuals may seek to make up for what is lacking in one relationship by turning to another relationship to meet their needs (Erel & Burman, 1995). Thus, siblings may form close relationships with one another to compensate for conflict between parents (Jenkins, 1992). Scholars have hypothesized that compensation is most likely in extreme family circumstances, such as when children experience a lack of parental care and high marital conflict (Bank 1992; Sheehan et al., 2004). Illustrating compensation, findings from a qualitative analysis of sibling relationships among separated and divorced parents revealed that siblings supported and consoled each other in the face of parents’ marital conflict (Sheehan et al., 2004). Another longitudinal study showed that fathers’ marital conflict was negatively related to sibling conflict (Kim et al., 2006), although, as noted earlier, findings from this same study supported a spillover hypothesis in the case of mothers’ marital experiences. In sum, the somewhat inconsistent findings from prior investigations highlight the importance of studying both mothers’ and fathers’ marital experiences as well as multiple dimensions of both marital and sibling relationships in efforts to understand marital–sibling relationship linkages.

THE ROLE OF ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN MARITAL–SIBLING RELATIONSHIP LINKAGES

Ecological and sociological theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder & Shanahan, 2006) direct attention to the contexts in which families are embedded, and empirical studies highlight the role of socioeconomic factors, including family economic hardship and neighborhood disadvantage for family relationships (Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002; Gonzalez et al., 2011; Landers-Potts et al., 2015). We built on this work, which documents both direct and indirect effects of socioeconomic factors on family relationships, to examine whether and how family economic factors moderated associations between family subsystems. We focused on parents' reports of economic strain as a psychological stressor and also moved beyond the interior of the family to study one dimension of the extrafamilial economic context, neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage. Parents' experiences of economic strain capture the everyday experiences associated with their objective financial circumstances. Neighborhood disadvantage, in contrast, serves as an objective indicator of the economic and social resources of the local context wherein families reside (Gutman & Eccles, 1999; Ross & Mirowsky, 2001).

Consistent with a cumulative risk model (Rutter, 1979), which holds that it is the combination of risk factors that is associated with poorer outcomes, family economic stressors may strengthen the linkages between marital conflict and both more sibling conflict and less sibling positivity. Results from an early study of a small sample of White families showed that spillover between family subsystems, including spillover from marital to sibling conflict, was more evident in families that experienced more stressors (Margolin et al., 1996). Findings from another study assessing spillover between marital and parent–child relationship among White families showed that on days when fathers experienced more stressors than usual (e.g., work overload), they were more than twice as likely to experience spillover of tense emotions from the marital relationship to the parent–child relationship (Almeida et al., 1999). Accordingly, in this study, we conceptualized parents' perceptions of economic strain as a risk factor that would exacerbate the positive association between marital conflict and sibling conflict and the negative association between marital conflict and sibling positivity. We also extended prior research to examine whether parents' perceptions of economic strain would weaken the positive association between marital satisfaction and sibling positivity and its negative association with sibling conflict.

Families are open systems, and thus conditions outside the family may have implications for their dynamics (Minuchin, 1988). Indeed, prior research documents that neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage is a risk factor for children's safety, health, academic achievement, parent–child relationships, and parents' psychological functioning (Leventhal, 2018). Neighborhood conditions also moderate associations between parenting and youth outcomes in diverse ways (Yonas et al., 2010). According to the amplified-disadvantage model, the negative impacts of family-level risk factors are magnified in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods (Noah, 2015). This is because neighborhood disadvantage can create additional stressors and reduce avenues for disengagement beyond the family, such as when, for example, unsafe neighborhoods mean that siblings must remain in their home, potentially exacerbating spillover effects. Consistent with the amplified-disadvantage model, we hypothesized that positive associations between marital and sibling conflict and negative associations between marital conflict and sibling positivity would be amplified for families who reside in neighborhoods characterized by high socioeconomic disadvantage. Conversely, we expected that neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage would weaken positive associations between marital satisfaction and sibling positivity and negative associations between marital satisfaction and sibling conflict.

THE ROLES OF PARENT AND YOUTH GENDER IN MARITAL–SIBLING RELATIONSHIP LINKAGES

Parent and youth gender also may have implications for associations between marital and sibling relationships. For example, because fathers' domestic role is less scripted (i.e., defined by social conventions) and thus more variable than mothers', their family experiences may be more salient to youth and more strongly linked to youth well-being (Almeida, 1999; Kim et al., 2006; Lam et al., 2012). In line with this perspective, results from a study of White families showed that both sibling intimacy and conflict were more strongly associated with fathers' than mothers' marital experiences (Kim et al., 2006). Scholars who study Black families, however, have posited that mothers are particularly central for this sociocultural group (Sutton et al., 2017), possibly making their marital experiences more salient and powerful than fathers' in shaping sibling relationships. Thus, we expanded on prior work to study the role parent gender in these relationship processes in Black families.

Youth gender may also have implications for connections between marital and sibling relationships. First, sisters report closer sibling relationships than brothers, on average (Kim et al., 2006; Whiteman et al., 2015). Further, Black girls, similar to girls of other racial/ethnic groups, tend to exhibit more relationally oriented, expressive traits compared with boys, and these traits that may make them particularly sensitive to their parents' marital experiences (Skinner & McHale, 2018).

CURRENT STUDY

In sum, we examined associations between two dimensions of marital and two dimensions of sibling relationships in a sample of Black families. Given the preponderance of prior evidence, we expect to find a spillover pattern linking these family relationships. We also examined family economic strain, neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage, and parent and youth gender as moderators of these expected spillover patterns. Drawing from a cumulative risk perspective and the amplified-disadvantage model, we hypothesized that family economic strain and neighborhood economic disadvantage would amplify associations between marital conflict and (lower) sibling positivity and (higher) sibling conflict, and weaken association between marital satisfaction and (lower) sibling conflict and (higher) sibling positivity. Further, given the central role of mothers in Black families, we hypothesized that linkages between parents' marital experiences and sibling relationship characteristics would be stronger for mothers' compared with fathers' relationship reports. We also expected that parents' marital relationship characteristics would be more strongly associated with girls' compared with boys' reports of their sibling relationships.

METHOD

Data source and sample

Data for this study came from a 3-year longitudinal project focused on gender socialization and development in Black American families. Participants were mothers, fathers, and two siblings (50% girls) from 185 families. Eligible families self-identified as Black/African American and included a mother and a father figure who lived together and were raising at least two adolescent children. In families with more than two children, the two consecutively born children who were closest to age 13 participated in the study. Families were recruited from communities in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. About half of the families were recruited by Black

recruiters who provided information to local churches, distributed flyers at youth activities, and posted advertisements in local businesses; the other half were recruited using contact information purchased from a marketing firm. The larger study included 202 families, but for the present analyses, we excluded families in which the parental figures were not romantically involved (e.g., a mother residing with her brother) or parental figures resided together for less than 3 years at the onset of the study. Data for youth older than 20 years or who did not reside with their parents at any point during the study (e.g., moved away from home to attend college) were also excluded.

At Time 1 (T1), older siblings averaged 14.0 years ($SD = 2.0$), and younger siblings averaged 10.4 ($SD = 1.1$). The average age difference between siblings was 3.7 years ($SD = 2.0$). Sibling dyads were almost equally divided by sex constellation (46 sister–sister pairs, 45 brother–brother pairs, and 94 mixed-sex dyads). On average, mothers were 40.7 ($SD = 5.7$) and fathers 43.4 ($SD = 7.2$) years of age. In terms of highest level of education, 3% of mothers completed less than a high school degree, 8.1% completed a high school degree, 54.1% completed some postsecondary training, and 35.2% completed a 4-year degree or higher. Almost 7% of fathers completed less than a high school degree, 17.6% completed a high school degree, 40.9% completed some postsecondary training and 34.7% completed a 4-year degree or higher. Parents had cohabited, on average, 14.2 years ($SD = 6.8$; range 3–44). Eighty-nine percent of parents were married. On average, families included three children (range 2–8) in the household. Mean family income was \$96,264 ($SD = \$75,157$), but ranged from less than \$10,000 to more than \$200,000. Although the mean family income was relatively high, the sample included working to upper-middle-class families with both mothers and fathers in the workforce. Over the 3 years of the study, attrition was 5%. Results from an independent-sample *t*-test showed that families who remained in the study did not differ from those who left the study on family income, parent education, length of parents' cohabitation, family economic strain, neighborhood economic disadvantage, parents' marital relationship, or youth's sibling relationship reports.

Procedure

Data for the analyses were collected during annual in-home interviews with fathers, mothers, and the target youth, which began with informed consent/assent procedures. During each study year, parents reported on their marital relationships and economic strain, and older and younger siblings were asked about their relationship with each other during the past year. Neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage was assessed using data from the 2005–2009 American Community Survey (ACS), a large-scale survey of approximately 3.5 million individuals conducted annually by the U.S. Census Bureau. We used ACS data that corresponded to the years in which families were interviewed. Families received a \$200 honorarium each year. The university's Institutional Review Board approved all study procedures.

Measures

Marital satisfaction was assessed with the Couple Relationship Domain Questionnaire (Huston et al., 1986). Using a 9-point scale (1 = *extremely dissatisfied*; 9 = *extremely satisfied*), mothers and fathers rated their satisfaction in eight domains (e.g., division of labor, communication about important issues). Items were averaged, with higher values reflecting higher marital satisfaction over the past year. Cronbach's alpha ranged from .88 to .92 across years and parents. Mothers' and fathers' reports were moderately correlated ($r = .35$ –.47).

Marital conflict was assessed using Braiker and Kelly's (1979) five-item Negativity/Conflict scale. Mothers and fathers responded to questions such as "How often do you feel angry or resentful toward your partner?" using a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 9 = *very much*). Items were averaged with higher values indicating more marital conflict over the past year. Cronbach's alphas ranged from .75 to .80 across time and reporter. Mothers' and fathers' conflict scores were moderately correlated ($r = .35-.46$).

Sibling positivity was assessed with Stocker and McHale's (1992) eight-item measure. Each sibling used a 5-point scale (1 = *never*; 5 = *always*) to answer questions such as "What about nice things like helping or doing favors for your brothers/sisters. How often do you do these kinds of things?" Items were averaged with higher scores indicating higher positivity. Across siblings and across time, Cronbach's alphas ranged from .75 to .83. Older and younger siblings' reports showed small to moderate positive correlations ($r = .25-.47$).

Sibling conflict was assessed using five items from the Sibling Relationship Inventory (Stocker & McHale, 1992; e.g., "How often would you say that your sister/brother starts fights or causes trouble for you?"). Sibling rated their response using a 5-point scale (1 = *never*; 5 = *always*). Items were averaged and higher numbers indicated higher conflict. Across siblings and time Cronbach's alphas ranged from .75 to .84. Siblings' reports showed small and positive correlations ($r = .17-.37$).

Family economic strain was assessed using a measure adapted from Conger et al. (1994) that included questions about parents' economic adjustments (e.g., did you avoid going to see the doctor or dentist when you need to because you had to save money?), financial satisfaction, difficulties paying bills, and having money left over after paying bills over the past year. Given different response scales, the scores for each item were standardized and averaged. Cronbach's alpha ranged from .92 to .93. Because mothers' and fathers' scores were moderately to highly correlated ($r = .56-.65$), consistent with prior research, they were averaged to create an index of family economic strain (Mistry et al., 2009; Solmeyer & McHale, 2017). Higher values indicate more economic strain over the past year.

Neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage was based on data from the 2005–2009 ACS. The home address of each family was geocoded and linear interpolation was used to create values for the years 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005 (the years in which interviews were conducted with families). Estimates of the percentage of residents in poverty, population over age 25 with less than a high school education, and female-headed household measured at the block level were standardized and averaged to create a total neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage score. Cronbach's alpha was .88. Previous studies have used a combination of these variables in addition to unemployment rate to access socioeconomic disadvantage (Deng et al., 2006), however, this information was not available at the block group level for our sample.

Covariates tested in preliminary models included family income in an effort to examine the effect of family economic strain above and beyond family earnings. We also included siblings' biological relatedness, family demographics such as length of parents' cohabitation, age difference between siblings, and whether the family experienced divorce during the study given the wide range of these values across families. Sibling dyad sex constellation was also tested as a covariate given prior research (Kim et al., 2006). The linear age term was included to capture developmental change in siblings' relationship. Only significant covariates were retained in the final models.

Analysis plan

Given the clustered nature of the data and our interest in both overall and time-varying (TV) effects, we used multilevel modeling (MLM). We estimated a three-level model, with time (the longitudinal assessments) clustered within individuals (Level 1), individuals

clustered in sibling dyads (Level 2), and siblings clustered within families (Level 3) for both sibling positivity and sibling conflict. MLM also allowed us to use sibling age as a metric of time and control for normative changes in sibling relationship despite the unbalanced nature of the data (e.g., youth differed in age at each time of assessment). MLM was also optimal for these data because it reduces biases in parameter estimations due to missing data (Schafer & Graham, 2002). Although 36 families did not have complete data on at least one of the sibling or marital relationship measures at one or more points in time, MLM allowed us to take advantage of the full sample of families (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Analyses were conducted using PROC MIXED in SAS Version 9.4 (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC).

Age was centered at 13 (the average age across youth across time points). We distinguished TV and person mean effects for all TV covariates (e.g., marital satisfaction, economic strain), and these variables were entered at Level 1 and Level 3, respectively. The TV covariate captured how individuals deviated from their own cross-time average on each measurement occasion, and the person mean (PM) covariate captured individuals' cross-time average in relation to those of the rest of the sample. Some scholars have suggested that TV (or within person) effects better illuminate within-family linkages than person mean effects (Knopp et al., 2017; Mastrotheodoros et al., 2019). The TV or within-person associations allowed us to investigate how changes in one family subsystem were associated with changes in a different family subsystem. Such an approach can provide a stronger test of family subsystem linkages than testing only overall associations between families by controlling for stable third variables such as personality characteristics and response biases, whether measured or not (Knopp et al., 2017; Mastrotheodoros et al., 2019).

Youth sex and birth order were entered as time invariant covariates at Level 2. Family income and neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage were entered at Level 3. Significant interactions were probed by comparing youth whose scores on the hypothesized moderator variable were 1 *SD* above and 1 *SD* below the sample average for interactions involving continuous variables (Aiken & West, 1991). Only significant interactions were retained in the final models. An example equation is as follows:

Level 1:

$$\begin{aligned}
 (\textit{Sibling Conflict})_{ij} = & \beta_{0ij} + \beta_{1ij}(\textit{Youth age})_{ij} + \beta_{2ij}(\textit{marital satisfaction})_{ij} \\
 & + \beta_{3ij}(\textit{marital conflict})_{ij} + \beta_{4ij}(\textit{TV economic strain})_{ij} + e_{ij}
 \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

Level 2:

$$\beta_{0ij} = \gamma_{00j} + \gamma_{01j}(\textit{Youth sex})_{ij} + \gamma_{02j}(\textit{Birth order})_{ij} + u_{0ij} \quad (2)$$

$$\beta_1 = \gamma_{10j}.$$

$$\beta_2 = \gamma_{20j}$$

$$\beta_3 = \gamma_{30j}$$

$$\beta_4 = \gamma_{40j}$$

Level 3:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \gamma_{00j} = & \pi_{000} + \pi_{001}(\textit{family income})_j + \pi_{002}(\textit{PM marital conflict})_j + \pi_{003}(\textit{PM marital satisfaction})_j \\
 & + \pi_{004}(\textit{PM economic strain})_j + \pi_{005}(\textit{neighborhood disadvantage})_j + \pi_{006}(\textit{divorce})_j + \delta_{00j}
 \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

$$\gamma_{01j} = \pi_{010}, \gamma_{02j} = \pi_{020}, \gamma_{10j} = \pi_{100}, \gamma_{20j} = \pi_{200}, \gamma_{30j} = \pi_{300}, \gamma_{40j} = \pi_{400}$$

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and correlations between key study variables are shown in Table 1. Stacked across mothers' and fathers' reports, on average, parents reported high marital satisfaction and low conflict. Siblings reported moderate levels of both positivity and conflict. Parents reported economic strain including some difficulty paying bills, having just about enough left over after paying bills, making about two economic adjustments over the past year, and being somewhat satisfied with their financial situation. On average, families resided in neighborhoods where 13.4% of individuals experienced poverty ($SD = 11.6$; range 0%–47%), 19.4% of adults had less than a high school degree ($SD = 12.3$; range 1.2%–66.9%), and 40% of households were female-headed ($SD = 13.8$; range 7.80%–71.8%). Results from multilevel models conducted separately for sibling positivity and conflict are presented in Table 2.

Linkages between parents' marital relationships and sibling positivity

Results for sibling positivity showed four significant two-way interactions. First, a Marital Conflict \times Youth Gender interaction at the TV level showed that on occasions when marital conflict (stacked across mothers' and fathers' reports) was higher than usual (i.e., compared with their own cross-time average), girls reported less sibling positivity than usual ($\gamma = -0.06$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .001$) consistent with a spillover process, but boys reported more positivity than usual, consistent with compensation ($\gamma = 0.05$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .012$). A significant TV Marital Conflict \times TV Economic Strain (Figure 1) effect showed that on occasions when marital conflict was higher than usual and parents experienced less economic strain than usual, sibling positivity was lower than usual ($\gamma = -0.04$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .053$). However, the positive association between marital conflict and sibling positivity was not significant on occasions when economic strain was higher than usual ($\gamma = 0.02$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .228$).

Next, a TV Marital Satisfaction \times PM Economic Strain interaction (Figure 2) showed that on occasions when parents reported more marital satisfaction than usual, youth reported more sibling positivity than usual, consistent with spillover, but only in the context of higher average economic strain, suggestive of siblings turning to one another under conditions of stress ($\gamma = 0.06$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = 0.003$). The interaction between marital satisfaction and economic strain was not significant when economic strain was low ($\gamma = -0.03$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .113$). Finally, a significant TV Marital Conflict \times Parent Gender interaction emerged ($\gamma = 0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .036$). Follow-up tests showed that although the slopes were significantly

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations between study variables across 3 study years ($N = 184$ families)

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Marital satisfaction						
2. Marital conflict	0.51***					
3. Sibling positivity	0.10**	-0.01				
4. Sibling conflict	0.01	-0.04	-0.08*			
5. Neighborhood disadvantage	0.17***	0.16**	0.05	0.00		
6. Family economic strain	-0.16***	0.16***	-0.05	0.05	0.23**	
Mean (SD)	7.0 (1.5)	4.0 (1.5)	2.9 (0.8)	2.7 (0.9)	13.4 (11.6)	0.0 (0.7)

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 2 Coefficients (and standard errors) from models with marital conflict and marital satisfaction predicting sibling positivity and conflict ($N = 184$ families)

	Sibling positivity	Sibling conflict
Intercept	3.58 (0.17)***	2.54 (0.21)***
Linear age	-0.06 (0.01)***	-0.06 (0.01)***
Birth order (0 = older)	-0.27 (0.07)***	-0.36 (0.08)***
Youth gender (0 = girl)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.07)
Family income	-0.04 (0.01)**	0.03 (0.02)
Parent gender (0 = mother)	0.00 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)
TV marital conflict	-0.09 (0.02)***	-0.00 (0.02)
PM marital conflict	0.01 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)
TV marital satisfaction	0.01 (0.01)	-0.03 (0.02)
PM marital satisfaction	0.02 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)
TV economic strain	0.02 (0.03)	0.13 (0.04)**
PM economic strain	-0.08 (0.07)	0.08 (0.07)
Neighborhood disadvantage	0.03 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.06)
TV Marital Sat × PM Economic Strain	0.07 (0.02)**	
TV Marital Conflict × TV Economic Strain	0.09 (0.04) *	
TV Marital Conflict × Parent Gender	0.06 (0.03)*	
TV Marital Conflict × Youth Gender	0.11 (0.03)***	
TV Conflict × Neighborhood Disadvantage		0.06 (0.02)**

Note. TV = time-varying effect; PM = person mean effect; Sat = satisfaction.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

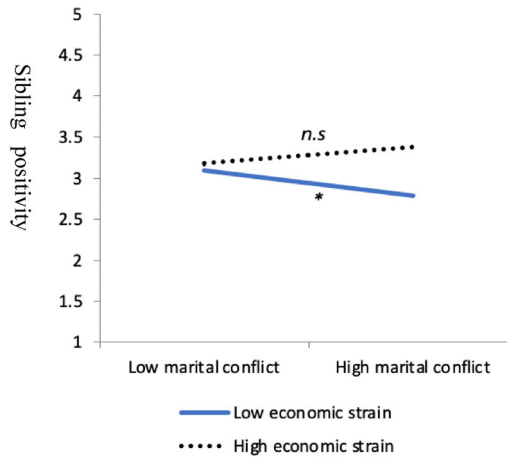


FIGURE 1 Interaction effects of time-varying marital conflict and time-varying economic strain on sibling positivity

Note. *n.s.* = nonsignificant association [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/famr.12688)]

different from each other they were not significantly different from zero (fathers: $\gamma = -0.03$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .091$; mothers: $\gamma = 0.02$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .30$). Beyond these time varying effects, PM marital conflict and marital satisfaction were not significantly related to sibling positivity.

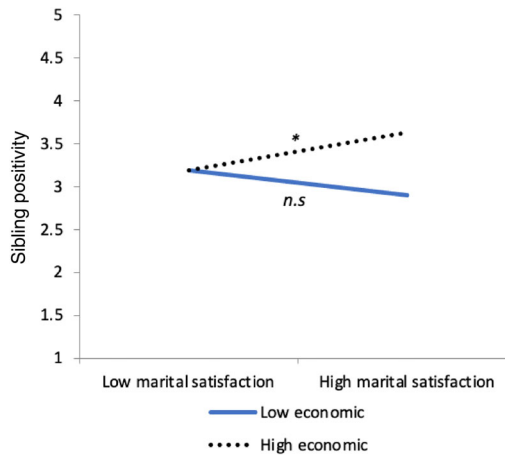


FIGURE 2 Interaction effects of time-varying marital satisfaction and person mean economic strain on sibling positivity

Note. n.s = nonsignificant association [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/famr.12688)]

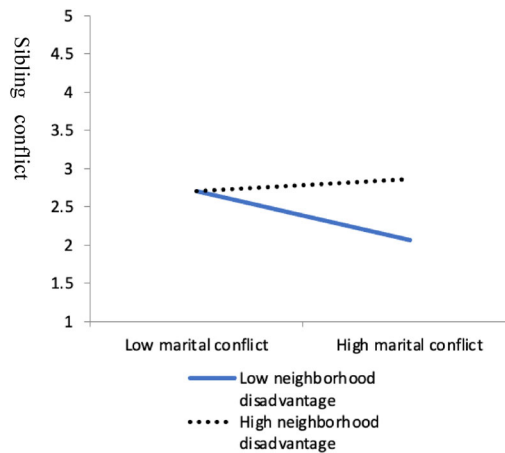


FIGURE 3 Interaction effects of time-varying marital conflict and neighborhood economic disadvantage on sibling conflict [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/famr.12688)]

Linkages between parents' marital relationships and sibling conflict

The main effect of TV marital conflict was qualified by a significant TV Marital Conflict \times Neighborhood Socioeconomic Disadvantage interaction (Figure 3). Simple slopes tests showed that, consistent with spillover and the amplified-disadvantage model, on occasions when parents reported more marital conflict than usual, siblings reported more conflict than usual when they resided in neighborhoods higher in socioeconomic disadvantage ($\gamma = 0.05$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .062$). However, consistent with a compensation process, marital conflict was negatively related to sibling conflict in the context of low neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage ($\gamma = -0.05$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .038$). In addition, a significant TV economic strain main effect showed that on occasions when parents experienced more economic strain than usual, youth reported more conflict with their siblings. PM and TV marital satisfaction and PM marital conflict were not significantly related to sibling conflict and there was no evidence of parent or sibling gender moderation.

DISCUSSION

Despite an abundance of studies examining associations between parents' marital relationships and sibling relationships (Ruff et al., 2018; Sheehan et al., 2004; Stocker & Youngblade, 1999), most have focused on White samples, and we know almost nothing about family contextual factors that condition associations between these family subsystems. Consistent with family systems and ecological perspectives, we found significant associations between marital and sibling relationships in this sample of Black families that varied as a function of internal and external family economic circumstances and youth gender. At the most general level, marital conflict was associated with sibling conflict and sibling positivity, and marital satisfaction was associated with sibling positivity. More specifically, results were more consistent with a spillover than a compensation process and targeted marital conflict as a risk factor for harmonious sibling relationships—in some family contexts and for some youth.

Consistent with the spillover hypothesis, girls reported more sibling conflict when parents (there was no moderation by parent gender) experienced more marital conflict than usual. Boys, in contrast, reported more sibling positivity on occasions when parents reported more conflict than usual. These results suggest that sisters may be more vulnerable to marital disharmony than brothers, possibly reflecting that girls tend to be higher in expressive qualities than boys (Skinner & McHale, 2018) and so particularly sensitive to parents' marital issues. In contrast, boys may have compensated for parents' marital disharmony by turning to their siblings for support. Notably, this pattern is contrary to the idea that women tend to form closer relationships in the face of conflict (Taylor et al., 2000), so replication of this finding is needed among Black families.

Linkages between marital relationship and sibling relationships varied by family economic strain. Contrary to our hypothesis, however, economic strain did function as a stressor that amplified links between, for example, marital conflict and sibling conflict or weakened associations between marital satisfaction and sibling positivity. First, marital conflict was negatively associated with sibling positivity when parents experienced lower economic strain than usual. This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting that spillover between parent-child relationships and parents' marital relationship occurs under conditions without additional stressors (Krishanakumar & Buehler, 2000). Specifically, results from a meta-analysis showed that the negative association between interparental conflict and parenting was stronger among middle-class families compared with low-income families and for more highly educated compared to less well-educated parents (Krishanakumar & Buehler, 2000). We also found that marital satisfaction was positively associated with sibling positivity—but only among families who experienced higher average economic strain. In other words, in contrast to results for marital conflict, in the context of economic strain, marital satisfaction was promotive of positive sibling relationships. Additional research is needed to understand this pattern; however, it may be that the domain of relationship and the type of stressor have implications for when spillover occurs. Importantly, economic strain was positively associated with sibling negativity and therefore consistent with prior research indicating that it is a risk factor for positive youth outcomes (Gutman et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2014).

Neighborhood disadvantage moderated the association between marital conflict and sibling conflict, with findings supporting the amplified-disadvantage model that the negative impacts of family-level risk factors are magnified in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods (Noah, 2015). It is important to note, however, that this result only reached trend level, so replication is essential. Marital conflict was also associated with less sibling conflict in the context of relatively lower neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage, meaning that neighborhoods with more resources may be protective for sibling relationships. These results add to prior research in documenting that the neighborhood context matters beyond its effects on individual family members' well-being by conditioning family systems processes (Noah, 2015).

Although economic strain and neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage often co-occur (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000), as evidenced by the positive, albeit low, correlations we found, they worked differently as moderators of associations between marital and sibling relationship quality. Notably, parents' economic strain was a more important factor in family relationship linkages than was neighborhood economic disadvantage. Families' economic circumstances may be more salient to youth, particularly when they vary over time, whereas youth may adjust to their stable (as measured in this study) neighborhood condition. This pattern also may reflect the fact that adolescents experience the effects of family economic strain more directly than they do neighborhood disadvantage. Importantly, most families did not reside in extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods (likely because the sampling criteria for the larger study required mother–father families in which both parents were employed); effects may have been more apparent with a more economically diverse sample. Further, in future research inclusion of both objective measures as well as subjective measures of parent and youth perceptions of neighborhood characteristics may provide insights on how neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage conditions family systems processes. Overall, however, the results suggest that socioeconomic factors in and beyond the family matter for Black family dynamics.

We also tested whether youth or parent gender moderated associations between marital and sibling relationships. As previously discussed, we found some evidence of youth gender moderation, with boys exhibiting a compensation pattern and girls a spillover pattern for links between marital conflict and sibling positivity. Given the central role of Black mothers and research showing that mothers and fathers play different roles in youth's development, we expected that mothers' marital experiences would be more strongly linked to sibling relationships compared with fathers' marital experiences (Kim et al., 2006; Sutton et al., 2017). There were, however, no significant parent gender differences in links between these family subsystems. These results highlight the importance of including both mothers and fathers in studies to understand Black children's development and the need to move beyond theorizing to conduct empirical research to understand gender dynamics in this sociocultural group. Notably, in a recent study from which these data are drawn, results revealed that mothers' and fathers' marital relationships were linked in similar ways to parent–child conflict and parent–child warmth (Skinner et al., 2021).

In general, we found more support for links between marital conflict than marital satisfaction and sibling relationship characteristics. Marital conflict was associated with both sibling positivity and sibling conflict. In contrast, marital satisfaction was linked to sibling positivity but did not protect against sibling conflict. The effects for marital conflict may reflect its greater salience for youth compared with marital satisfaction (Dawson et al., 2015). Some scholars have suggested that Black youth are less vulnerable than White youth to the impacts of marital dysfunction (McLoyd et al., 2001). Although parent–child relationships within this sociocultural context may be less subject to the effects of parents' marital conflict, our findings suggest that aspects of these youth's lives—namely, their sibling relationships—may be negatively affected.

Overall, findings from this study alert us to the interactive effects of person (gender), family process (marital dynamics), and context (family socioeconomic conditions) in shaping adolescent sibling relationships. Future research should develop and test more comprehensive models of family systems processes such as spillover and compensation and how they vary as a function of person and context characteristics in diverse racial/ethnic groups. Another direction is to use a person-centered approach to capture multiple dimensions of sibling relationships. Such an approach is in keeping with prior studies that have identified correlates of relationship typologies defined by levels of both positivity and negativity including in this sample (McHale et al., 2007) and address the point that, although statistically independent, sibling positivity and negativity are intertwined in siblings' everyday experiences (McGuire et al., 1996). Another

important step is to examine the direction of marital–sibling relationship effects. In this study, we conceptualized parents’ marital relationships as influencing those of siblings, but the direction of effect may be reversed and most likely is bidirectional (Yu & Gamble, 2008). In addition, many families include more than two children, and future research should examine the role of marital relationships in multiple sibling relationships within a family. Another direction is to examine potential mediating processes, such as the role of parent–child relationships or parent mental health in the links between marriage and sibling relationships. Finally, the study was limited to a sample of two-parent heterosexual Black couples from a limited geographic region who were generally well functioning. Additional research is needed with larger, more diverse samples of Black families.

CONCLUSION

Family relationships are interconnected, and adolescents may be keen observers of their parents’ marriage. This study contributed to the literatures on family and youth development by focusing on parents’ marital relationship experiences in an understudied group: Although 33% of Black youth under age 18 reside in two-parent households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), little is known about the role of marriage in the well-being of these youth. This study also contributed to the family systems literature in its focus on person and context factors in family subsystem linkages and to the literature on Black families in documenting how socioeconomic conditions—particularly salient for Black families given discrimination and marginalization in the labor force and lack of accumulated wealth (Hamilton & Darity, 2017)—shape the connections between marital and sibling relationships. Together, our findings suggest that practitioners look beyond individual relationships to consider interconnected family dynamics in efforts to promote youth well-being. Equally important are social policies that address structural factors that foster and maintain economic inequities.

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