



The Research Methods and Aspects of the Impact of Marital Conflict on Children: a Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract. As marital conflict has become a common occurrence, the impact on children has become a prominent concern in recent years. This study conducted a systematic review of the impact of interparental conflict and intimate partner violence on children, intending to provide an overview of the field. A systematic search of the Web of Science™ core collection was conducted, and 11 SCI and SSCI journal articles published between 1994 and 2024 were identified and reviewed by two independent researchers. The findings indicate that marital conflict exerts a pervasive, rather than a limited, influence on children. The literature included in the study employed two distinct research designs: cross-sectional and longitudinal studies. The cross-sectional approach involved the collection of children's self-reports and parental questionnaires, thereby elucidating the impact of marital conflict on children. In contrast, the longitudinal study demonstrated that the ramifications of marital conflict may persist long after the conflict has ceased, influencing children's long-term emotional and behavioral development. The study revealed that the impact on children is generalized and interrelated, and thus reclassified according to child development into three dimensions: physiological, cognitive and intellectual, and socio-emotional. This reclassification may prove useful for future interventions for children who are negatively impacted. I hope that this study will inform child development researchers and practitioners in integrating a learner's perspective on the impact of marital conflict on children.

Keywords: marital conflict, children, children development.

1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, marital conflict has been the subject of growing scholarly attention, with calls for greater focus on this area, particularly with regard to its impact on children. As marital conflict has become more prevalent, the various types of impact on children have been the subject of increasing scrutiny by relevant researchers.

1.1 What is Marital Conflict?

Marital conflict is broadly conceptualized, with Davies and Cummings (1994) arguing that understanding the context of marital conflict, including factors such as prior conflict-related experiences, parental temperament, and the age and gender of the child, influences how children perceive and respond to marital discord[1]. Marital conflict in this study included (Kopystynska et al., 2022) inter-parental conflict (IPC) and intimate partner violence (IPV)[2]. From previous research on marital conflict, the types of conflict can be categorized into two main groups: destructive versus constructive conflict, and physical versus verbal conflict. Destructive conflict includes aggressive behavior, unresolved disputes, and negative emotional exchanges that threaten the emotional security of the family; such conflicts are characterized by hostility, criticism, and lack of resolution, which can lead to emotional distress and maladjustment in children; whereas constructive conflict refers to the fact that when parents resolve conflicts in an amicable manner, it can increase children's sense of emotional security and help them learn effective coping strategies. Physical conflict is characterized primarily by conflict over physical aggression and is particularly detrimental to children's development, while verbal conflict appears to be less severe than physical aggression but can still significantly affect children's emotional well-being. In addition, dimensions of conflict have been described in terms of frequency, intensity, content, and resolution, particularly during infancy and early childhood, when marital conflict is at an explosive stage.

1.2 The Impact of Marital Conflict on Children

While there is a positive correlation between marital conflict and children's development, the strength of this relationship is relatively weak due to a variety of factors. Naeem and Bushra' (2021) study generally showed a positive correlation between marital conflict and an increase in children's health problems.[3] Parent-child relationships also played a mediating role between marital relationships and children's mental health. Bendera and Bender (2022) noted that this relationship has been well-documented over several decades and that exposure to high levels of marital discord puts children at greater risk for a variety of psychological disorders[4]. In addition, Junco-Guerrero and Miriam (2022) found that prolonged exposure to conflict leads to children's insecurity about their relationship with their parents[5]. Unresolved versus resolved conflict significantly affects children's emotional responses; children exposed to high levels of marital conflict show higher levels of distress, aggression, and emotional dysregulation, which have a greater impact than divorce itself. Children's emotional security is affected not only by direct exposure to conflict but also by the quality of the parent-child relationship. Secure attachment relationships with parents can buffer children from the negative effects of marital discord, and Davies and Cummings (1994) note that children typically show fewer negative reactions after experiencing conflict resolution[1].

2 Research Questions

In conclusion, while there have been studies analyzing the impact of marital conflict on children, there is a paucity of literature examining the psychological theories related to this impact. Furthermore, there is seldom a comprehensive theoretical classification of the impact of marital conflict on children in the past.

First and foremost, the majority of extant studies are empirical in nature, with a primary focus on the categorization of marital conflict, related interventions, and the impact on children. While previous empirical studies can provide specific data on the impact on children and thus reflect the extent of the impact, empirical studies often report only moderate correlations and have limitations. This is particularly true given that the impact of marital conflict on children is long-term and multifaceted. As a result, empirical studies are unable to present a complete picture of the research.

Secondly, in the process of collating the literature, it was found that previous studies had primarily focused on the impact of marital conflict on children in relation to a number of specific outcomes, including neurological disorders, physical health, mental health, behavioral issues, criminality, and academic and employment outcomes. However, there is a need to summarise the impact of marital conflict on children as a developmental issue from a human development perspective.

In light of the aforementioned considerations, the current study presents the following research questions.

1. What research methods have been employed in the investigation of the impact of marital conflict on children?
2. What aspects of the impact on children in the context of marital conflict can be classified?
3. To what extent do the identified aspects of the impact on children in the context of marital conflict align with the existing research in the field of developmental psychology and individual development?

3 Methods

This study employed a systematic literature review methodology to examine the fundamental aspects of empirical studies on marital conflict and its impact on children. The screening and coding of literature were conducted using the CADIMA website, while the data analysis and charting were performed with the Microsoft Excel software.

3.1 Database Searching

To ensure the research value of this study, the English literature reviewed in this study was obtained from SSCI and SCI journals in the Web of Science database. Since "marital conflicts" is translated as "marital disputes" in the English literature, a direct search for "marital conflicts on children" in the Web of Science database yielded 2,355 English

articles. Therefore, we directly searched for "marital conflicts on children" in the Web of Science database and obtained 2355 English articles.

After searching the target database and eliminating duplicate entries, 2355 English articles (as of October 13, 2024) were obtained.

3.2 Literature Screening

Since the quality of some of the literature obtained from the search does not meet the needs of the study, it is necessary to assess and screen the original literature objects. In this study, the literature screening step is the "literature quality assessment" step in the systematic literature review.

In this study, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed (as shown in Table 1). There were two rounds of literature screening: reading the titles and abstracts of the literature to screen the literature and reading the full text of the literature to screen the literature. Both rounds of literature screening were conducted by two researchers. In addition to the researcher herself, an undergraduate student majoring in fashion communication was invited to screen the literature independently. After reading the titles and abstracts of the literature and preliminarily eliminating the literature that did not meet the needs of the study, the kappa value of the two researchers' screening results was calculated to be 0.65, which is an acceptable consistency, probably because there was some disagreement about the title and abstract of the literature on the study of the effects of marital conflict on children in the independent screening process. After the two researchers discussed together whether or not to keep the literature with disagreement in the first round of literature screening, 14 pieces of literature were kept. The two researchers then read the full text of the remaining literature to further screen for literature that fully met the needs of the criteria. A total of 11 papers were finalized for inclusion in the study. The Prisma flowchart for literature screening is shown in Figure 1.

Table 1. Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
1.Research was published in English	1.Non-English published, republished literature
2.Full text available	2.Full text not available
3.The research belongs to psychological and social disciplines	3.Research belongs to other disciplines
4.The literature types are SCI and SSCI journal papers	4.The literature types are non-SCI and SSCI journal papers
5.The subjects were children	5.The subjects of the study were couples, elders and other personnel
6.The study scenario was the effect of marital conflict on children	6.The study scenario was the effect of marital conflict on other members
7.There are clear criteria for dividing marital conflict	7.It is not clear whether it is marriage, and the conflict is not clearly defined

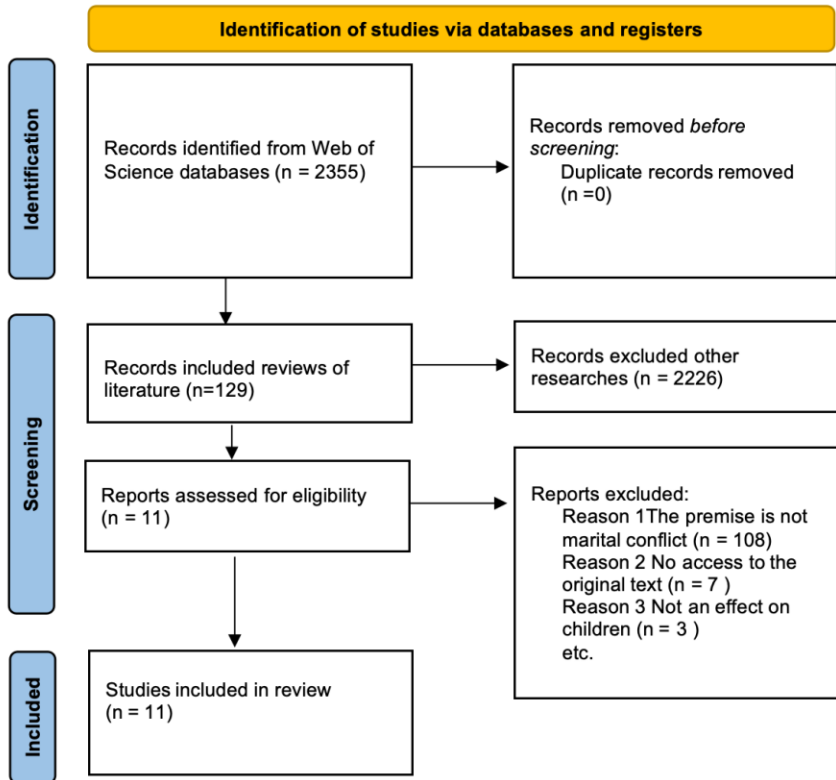


Fig. 1. Literature Screening Prisma Flowchart

3.3 Coding Framework

In the literature coding, which is the "data extraction" step of the systematic literature review, the study developed a literature coding table based on the research questions, as shown in Table 2. In addition to the researcher herself, an undergraduate student majoring in fashion communication was invited to code 10% of the included literature after independently reading the full text of the literature, and the coding results of the two researchers were calculated, and 80% consistency was obtained, which is a high degree of consistency. After discussion, it was found that the two researchers mainly disagreed on the criteria for defining marital conflict. After the two researchers negotiated and agreed on all coding results, the coding of the remaining literature was done by one of the authors of this study.

Table 2. Literature Coding Table

Dimensionality	Descriptive Name	Coding
Research Basic Information	Research Identification Code	Research Identification Code (unique)
	Literature title	Literature title
	The First Author	The First Author
	Year of publication	Year of publication
	Research sites	Country/area of study implementation
Research sample information	Sample size of the study	Sample size of the study
	Age groups	Children
Research Method	Criteria for classifying marital conflicts	The rationale for the division
	Impact of marital conflict on children	Children's self-reports, parents' diaries, etc.
Research Design	Impact of marital conflict on children	Cross-sectional study, longitudinal study

4 Results

The results of the study are divided into three main sections: Descriptive analysis, research methodology, and impact aspects.

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

A total of 11 English-language literature were included in this study, and the literature included in the study was more dispersed in terms of year of publication, as shown in Figure 2, where there was only one publication that met the inclusion criteria for this study from 1994, 2000-2004, 2009, 2018, and 2020-2022. This indicates a more dispersed nature of research on the effects on children in the context of marital conflict research. The research sites included in the study are mainly in the United States, followed by the United Kingdom and Croatia, and the two countries where the study was conducted together: the United States/United Kingdom had a total of two publications, and the United States/Austria had a total of one publication that met the inclusion criteria for this study.

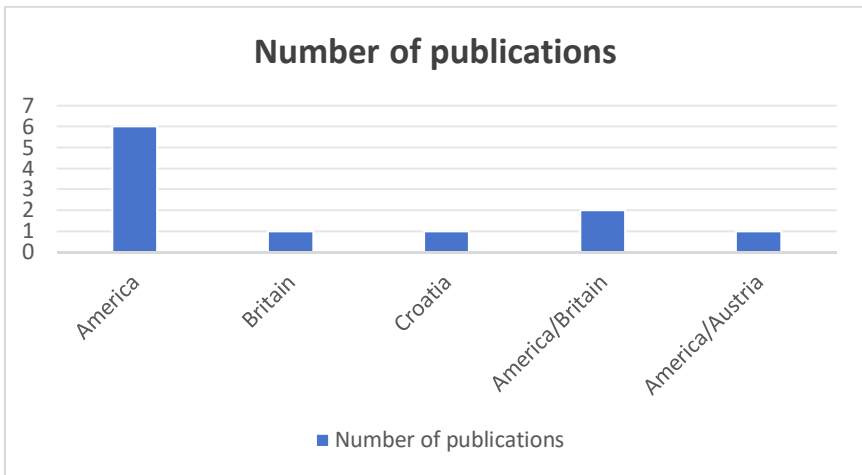


Fig. 2. Country distribution of research projects and number of publications

4.2 Research Methodology

After reading the full text of the coding statistics, most of the included studies summarized the effects of marital conflict on children by searching databases and reading relevant literature reviews. As seen in Figure 3, the research design used in the literature review in most of the included studies was a longitudinal study that documented the long-term effects of marital conflict on children, and these data were available for the researcher to analyze and examine. A few other studies also included research methods such as child self-reports, parent questionnaires, and parent diary studies. Three of the included studies proposed a biopsychosocial model, an emotional security hypothesis, and an integrative theoretical model as evidence support.

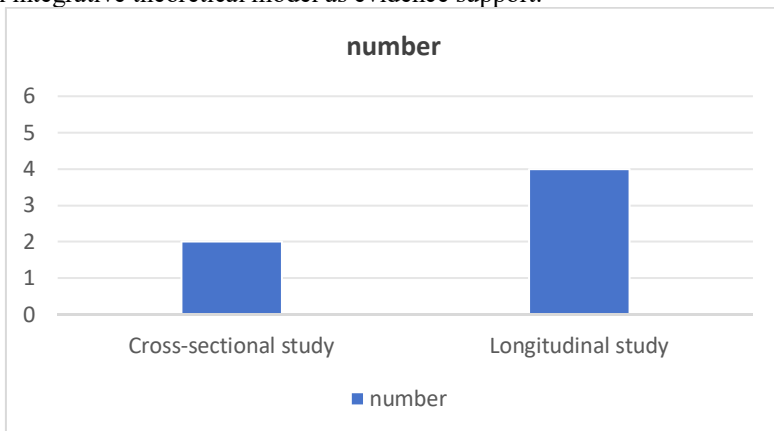


Fig. 3. The Number of Two Methods of Study Design

4.3 Impact Aspects

In this study, the effects of marital conflict on children were categorized according to the domains of developmental psychology and individual development. First, in terms of physiology, this study found that conflict between parents can lead to sleep disturbances in children (Harold and Sellers, 2018)[6]; children exposed to high levels of marital conflict showed poorer health outcomes, which were associated with children having increased levels of cortisol in their bodies or altered ANS responses, such as increased heart rate or increased skin conductance levels. Prolonged exposure to conflict can lead to dysregulation of the body's stress response system, which can affect overall health. Many children who experience IPV also experience direct physical abuse (Stiller, et al.2022)[7].

Second, in terms of children's cognitive development. This study found that children who experience interparental conflict often experience internalizing problems, including anxiety, and depression, and children living in IPV environments exhibit higher levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms, which are more common in children who experience ongoing conflict and can carry over into adolescence and adulthood; and also exhibit externalizing behaviors (Schmengler, H., et al.2021)[8], such as aggression and antisocial behavior, a behavioral pattern that is prevalent in children and adolescents and is associated with long-term negative outcomes such as academic failure and substance abuse.

Finally, in terms of children's emotional and social development, this study found that marital conflict also has an impact, mainly in the form of low self-esteem; children mimicking aggressive behaviors from the conflict; and social and interpersonal problems. Children affected by interparental conflict may have difficulties with social skills and relationships. They tend to have poorer peer relationships and future intimate relationships may be affected. Marital discord can negatively affect the quality of parenting.

5 Conclusion

An analysis of the impact of marital conflict on children reveals that past research on the impact aspects has tended to be more comprehensive. The impact of marital conflict on children has been gradually emphasized, reflecting the possible impact of different aspects on children. The impact aspects should be categorized scientifically and systematically, so this study refers to developmental psychology and the theory of individual developmental domains to reclassify them so that the negative impact of marital conflict on children can be addressed in a more targeted way. In the course of the study, the authors believe that the reason why children are affected may be because children are young and not yet able to cope with conflict and intimate relationships and are vulnerable to external interference; couples who are unable to solve their own problems and hope that children can serve as emotional support unconsciously transfer marital conflict to children. This study did not specify the age of the children, and what other perspectives can be used to analyze the impact of marital conflict on children and how to intervene effectively are issues that need to be explored in the future.

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