



## Parents' differential susceptibility to the effects of marital quality on sensitivity across the first year

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### ABSTRACT

The current investigation examined the differential susceptibility of parents to the effects of marital quality on changes in parenting. We predicted that parents who were high on the personality constructs Negative Affect and Constraint would be more susceptible to the effects of marital quality on their level of sensitivity. Sensitivity was assessed at 3.5 and 13 months for both mothers and fathers during a triadic interaction. Consistent with the differential susceptibility theory, results suggested that when mothers were high on Negative Affect and when fathers were high on Constraint, their marital quality was associated with changes in sensitivity. This investigation suggests that personality factors may create “vulnerabilities” in parents that make them differentially susceptible to the effects of the family environment on parenting.

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### 1. Introduction

Parental sensitivity is often considered one of the most important aspects of quality caregiving. Early parental sensitivity has been linked to a number of positive child outcomes including: attachment security (de Wolff & van Ijzendoorn, 1997), enhanced cognitive development (Lemelin, Tarabulsky, & Provost, 2006), and higher levels of school readiness (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1999). In light of its established significance for child development, the precursors and correlates of parental sensitivity are of great interest to researchers.

Family systems researchers are particularly interested in how families develop and change over time (Cox & Paley, 2003; Darling & Steinberg, 1993). During the transition to parenthood, parents must learn how to behave toward their new baby and toward each other in new ways (Cox, 1985). This learning process implies that parenting may not be stable—particularly during the first year of life—as parents are adjusting to their new family system. Research has confirmed that parenting is less stable during infancy than when children are older (Holden & Miller, 1999). Thus, parenting patterns may become established toward the end of infancy, and these patterns may remain stable across childhood. Examining the predictors of increases or decreases in parenting quality during this transition may help identify families at risk for developing and/or maintaining insensitive parenting patterns across childhood.

In addition to understanding changes in parenting across time, the study of parenting in multiple contexts is also valuable for understanding family systems. Past research has focused primarily on dyadic parent–child contexts. Family systems

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theory, however, calls for examinations of parenting in other contexts, particularly the triadic context (Minuchin, 1985, 1988). Children in two-parent families spend a significant amount of time in triadic interaction with both parents present (Craig, 2006). Thus, it is important for researchers to examine this often ignored context.

Parents act differently toward their children when their spouse is present than they do in dyadic parent–child interactions (Belsky, 1979; Buhrmester, Camparo, Christensen, Gonzalaz, & Hinsaw, 1992; Goldberg, Clark-Stewart, Rice, & Dellis, 2002; Lindsey & Caldera, 2006). As such, studying the quality of interaction in a triadic context allows researchers to see a unique and more complex slice of family life (McHale, 1995; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998). Changes in parenting across time have been investigated in the dyadic context, and we extend our work to further understand the predictors of change in parenting in the triadic context.

### 1.1. Determinants of parenting: marital quality

Belsky (1984) proposed that parenting is multiply determined and is dependent on parental, infant, and contextual factors (see also Belsky & Jaffee, 2006). In this model, factors pertaining to parents' psychological resources are highlighted. Specifically, parental personality and marital quality are proposed to be the most influential determinants of parenting quality and style (Belsky, 1984; see also Prinzie, Stams, Dekovic, Reijntjes, & Belsky, 2009; Verhoeven, Junger, Van Aken, Deković, & Van Aken, 2007).

It has been well documented that there is a positive association between marital quality and parenting. A meta-analysis by Erel and Burman (1995) reported a positive association between marital quality and parent–child relations ( $d = .46$ ) and a comparably strong effect size during the infants' first year of life ( $d = .47$ ). More recent research has established that marital quality plays a role in parenting not only in dyadic contexts, but also in triadic contexts. Kitzmann (2000) found that negativity in marital interactions was associated with more negativity in subsequent family-level interactions. On the other hand, parents who are in loving, supportive marriages may develop patterns of positive interactions as they work cooperatively in parenting (Talbot & McHale, 2004), and these interactions may strengthen over time as parents become more comfortable interacting with their infants.

### 1.2. Differential susceptibility

The theory of differential susceptibility (Belsky, 1997; Belsky, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van IJzendoorn, 2007) proposes that certain individuals are more susceptible to the effects of both positive and negative environmental influences. Belsky (2005) argues that it may be evolutionarily adaptive for children within the same family to differ in their levels of vulnerability to environmental influences and that these differences in vulnerability may increase reproductive success by protecting some children in the family from unsuccessful parenting practices (see also Belsky & Pluess, 2009).

Although the theory of differential susceptibility was originally applied to the study of infant behavior (e.g., Feldman, Greenbaum, & Yirmiya, 1999), researchers have recently extended this theory to adults by examining the differential susceptibility of certain parents with respect to parental sensitivity (van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Mesman, 2008). These researchers examined the associations between daily hassles and parental sensitivity. They found that for parents with certain genetic compositions (i.e., DRD4-7R and COMTval alleles) there was a negative association between daily hassles and parental sensitivity. Parents without this genetic combination did not show an association between daily hassles and sensitivity.

The current investigation extends this line of research by examining the differential susceptibility of parents with certain personality traits to the effects—both positive and negative—of marital quality on parenting. This study examined two higher order personality factors: Negative Affect and Constraint (Tellegen, 1982), and we will describe each of these with respect to the theory of differential susceptibility.

#### 1.2.1. Negative Affect

Much of the research on differential susceptibility has examined infants and children high on negative emotionality or stress reactivity and their differential susceptibility to rearing environments (e.g., Belsky, Hsieh, & Crnic, 1998; Boyce & Ellis, 2005). Researchers theorized that children high on negative emotionality may be particularly hyperreactive to stress and thus more easily influenced by their environments (Boyce & Ellis, 2005). Negative Affect in adulthood is associated with both stress reactivity and negative emotionality in infancy and childhood (Caspi, 2000; Caspi et al., 2003; Caspi & Silva, 1995). Thus, we predicted that parents who were high on Negative Affect would be differentially susceptible to both positive and negative effects of marital quality. We predicted that these parents would increase in sensitivity when in high quality marriages and decrease when in low quality marriages as they adjusted to their new infant.

#### 1.2.2. Constraint

Research has also found evidence for the differential susceptibility of fearful, "uptight," or inhibited infants and children to environmental stimuli. An investigation by Gilissen, Koolstra, van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, and van der Veer (2007) found that temperamentally fearful children were more susceptible to the quality of their relationship with their parents. These children showed more fear responses to frightening stimuli when they had low quality relationships with their parents and fewer fear responses when those relationships were high quality. Additionally, Kochanska, Aksan, and Joy

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