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Constructive interparental conflict and child adjustment in the Chinese context: a moderated mediation model of emotional security and disintegration avoidance

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Constructive Interparental Conflict and Child Adjustment: A Moderated Mediation Model of Emotional Security and Disintegration Avoidance

Abstract

Grounded in emotional security theory and a dualistic model of harmony, the present study sought to test a moderated mediation model of harmony and family processes associated with child adjustment. A total of 70 Chinese parents completed a set of questionnaires on parents' disintegration avoidance (i.e., a dimension of harmony), constructive interparental conflict, and their children's emotional security, internalizing problems, and externalizing problems (32 girls and 38 boys; M_{age} = 4.83 years old; SD_{age} = 1.90). Multi-group path analysis was conducted to examine the mediating role of children's emotional security between constructive interparental conflict and child adjustment among parents with high vs. low disintegration avoidance. Significant pathways emerged to suggest emotional security as a mediator between constructive interparental conflict and children's externalizing problems, when parents reported a high level of disintegration avoidance. Children's emotional security was related to internalizing problems when parents reported a low level of disintegration avoidance. The findings enhanced our knowledge on the mediating role of emotional security in the context of Chinese culture. Evidence informs translational research that promote emotional security as an asset of child adjustment, particularly in families experiencing a high level of disintegration avoidance.

Keywords: child adjustment; constructive interparental conflict; disintegration avoidance; emotional security; harmony

Constructive Interparental Conflict and Child Adjustment: A Moderated Mediation Model of Emotional Security and Harmony

A growing body of research has indicated that interparental conflict is pertinent to child adjustment. Importantly, destructive conflict compromises children's mental and physical health, social development, and sleep quality (Cui et al., 2005; Cui & Donnellan, 2009; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Kelly & El-Sheikh, 2011), whereas constructive conflict facilitates better behavioral outcomes including greater prosocial behaviors, fewer aggressive behaviors, and fewer adjustment difficulties (Cheung et al., 2016; Cummings et al., 2003; Goeke-Morey et al., 2007; McCoy et al., 2009). Grounded in emotional security theory (EST; Davies & Cummings, 1994) and a dualistic model of harmony (DMH; Leung et al., 2002), the present study aims to address the processes linking harmony, constructive interparental conflict, and child adjustment in the Chinese context.

EST posits that children's development of a sense of security, protection, and safety is a developmental hallmark in early childhood (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Within the family context, frequent exposure to destructive interparental conflict, as characterized by parents' anger, hostility, and aggression, threatens children's felt security, which is marked by dysregulatory processes including elevated emotional reactivity (e.g., fear and sadness), maladaptive coping behaviors (e.g., avoidance and over-involvement), worry, distress, vigilance, and preoccupation with interparental conflict (Cummings & Davies, 2011). According to Davies et al. (2002a; 2006), prolonged emotional insecurity can heighten children's maladaptive responding tendencies outside family settings, such as being less skilled, less open, and less flexible in forming and maintaining peer relationships. In addition, the energy that children require to regain security may increase their risk for adjustment problems and limit their psychological resources to pursue stage-salient developmental goals. To date, numerous findings suggest that children's emotional insecurity is linked to child maladjustment (e.g., Cummings et al., 2012). In addition, emotional insecurity serves as an underlying mechanism between destructive interparental conflict and children's internalizing and externalizing problems (e.g., Cummings et al., 2012; Koss et al., 2014).

Contrary to the longstanding literature about the negative consequences of destructive conflict on children's emotional security, mixed findings have been reported for the benefits of constructive interparental conflict (e.g., emotional support, respect, validation, and constructive problem-solving

techniques) on child adjustment. Some studies suggested that children's exposure to constructive interparental conflict fostered their sense of emotional security, prosocial behaviors, autonomy-promoting behaviors, and peer relationships, and lower their behavioral problems (Barthassat, 2014; Cheung et al., 2016; Cummings et al., 2003 McCoy et al., 2009; McCoy et al., 2013; Miga et al., 2011). Likewise, another study revealed that constructive interparental conflict interacted with marital hostility, such that parents' effective conflict resolution ameliorated the negative effect of marital hostility on children's perceived threat (Zhou & Buehler, 2017). Mothers' and fathers' destructive and constructive conflict were also linked to coparenting alliance (Kopystynska et al., 2020), which is crucial for child adjustment (e.g., McDaniel et al., 2017). Recently, Warmuth et al. (2020) found that constructive interparental conflict was linked to children's internalizing and externalizing problems through parenting behaviors, such as control through guilt and unsupportive reactions. These findings suggested that children benefit from constructive conflict behaviors either directly or indirectly through parenting practices.

Although some studies demonstrated additive effects of constructive and destructive conflict on children's emotional responses (Cummings et al., 2002, 2003), a handful of studies suggested that the benefits of parents' positivity and constructive conflict on emotional security was negligible, especially when compared to the detrimental effect of destructive conflict (Brock & Kochanska, 2016; Coln et al., 2013; Davies et al., 2012; Zemp et al., 2016). For example, in a longitudinal study, Davies et al. (2012) investigated how children were affected by constructive interparental conflict tactics, such as parents' efforts in making progress towards conflict resolution and using constructiveness to communicate relationship challenges. They found that constructive conflict was not predictive of children's change in emotional security over and above the adverse effect of destructive conflict tactics. Likewise, Coln et al. (2013) found that negative parenting practices (e.g., inconsistent discipline, corporal punishment, and poor monitoring or supervision), psychological control (e.g., guilt induction, invalidating feelings, and unpredictable emotional behavior toward the child), and children's externalizing problems were associated with destructive, but not constructive, interparental conflict. The mixed findings in the literature were intriguing and deserve empirical attention and replications aiming to identify why, how, and when constructive interparental conflict may be crucial to child development.

Moderating Role of Harmony

In this study, we argue that the strength of association between constructive conflict and children's emotional security may depend on interpersonal harmony. Interpersonal harmony is prevalent and highly valued in Chinese families (Bond, 2010; Morling & Fiske, 1999). With roots in Confucianism, Chinese proverbs such as "家和萬事興" (i.e., All affairs prosper in harmonious families) and "以和為貴" (i.e., Harmony is precious) emphasize the importance of "和", which stands for harmony. As such, the cultivation of family harmony is rooted in the Chinese context. In DMH, Leung and colleagues (2002) postulated that different dimensions of harmony may contribute differently to conflict management and the overall family climate. For example, harmony enhancement involving parents' patience, forgivingness, and willingness to compromise may strengthen conflict management between parents and its effect on children's outcomes. Paradoxically, disintegration avoidance may backfire to foster a negative conflict management atmosphere between parents that undermines children's emotional security.

Disintegration avoidance refers to "avoiding actions that will strain a relationship and lead to its weakening and dissolving" (Leung, 1997, p. 644). In order to preserve harmony, a healthy balance of disintegration avoidance and harmony enhancement is indeed necessary (Leung et al., 2002). However, high levels of disintegration avoidance rooted in self-concern may entail a strong preference of conflict avoidance, yielding, and smoothing (Leung et al., 2002), as opposed to open discussion of conflict and challenges. Examples of disintegration avoidance including capitulation, incongruent private thoughts versus public behaviors, conflict avoidance, and hidden competitive behaviors may contribute to an overall negative family atmosphere and children's adjustment difficulties (Kerig, 1996; Schrodt, 2005; Ubinger et al., 2013; Zhang, 2015). For instance, parents with high disintegration avoidance may have a greater tendency to believe that they need to "ride with the tide" and not to worry about what is unfair or unacceptable, that it is sometimes necessary to give up principles of justice in order to preserve harmony, and that they should maintain harmonious relationships to avoid future embarrassment (Leung et al., 2011, p. 801). High disintegration avoidance may also be depicted by families with high levels of conflict avoidance and withdrawal. For example, in order to preserve harmony, parents with high disintegration avoidance may avoid confrontations or withdraw from interparental conflict at the expense of upholding their values and principles. Counterintuitively, again parents' avoidance and withdrawal may backfire to create *more* perturbations beyond the interparental subsystem (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). For example,

Sturge-Apple et al. (2006) found that interparental withdrawal was related to fathers' emotional unavailability for their children, which was further related to children's subsequent internalizing problems. In Chinese families, conflict avoidance also undermined marital adjustment (Lewinsohn & Werner, 1997) and adjustment of children (e.g., lower social competence and more internalizing problems; Zhang, 2015) with difficult temperament.

To reiterate, disintegration avoidance is an aspect of harmony that goes beyond the avoidance of interpersonal confrontations. Previous research indicated that the association between disintegration avoidance and conflict avoidance was moderate (Leung et al., 2011), and that conflict avoidance was only one of the means for avoiding the disintegration of a relationship (Leung et al., 2011, p. 812). Importantly, high disintegration avoidance manifested by examples such as avoiding conflict, giving up principles of justice to preserve harmony, and smoothing conflict over (Leung et al., 2011) may be detrimental to families and child development in Eastern and Western contexts (e.g., Sturge-Apple et al., 2006; Zhang, 2015). As such, disintegration avoidance may serve as a background family atmosphere that affects parent-child dynamics and child adjustment. Coupled with core tenets of EST, we expect that disintegration avoidance may alter the significance of conflict behaviors on children's emotional security. For example, disintegration avoidance may moderate the relation between constructive interparental conflict and emotional security. Of note, when parents had a *low* level of disintegration avoidance (e.g., via low conflict avoidance, capitulation, and hidden competition), then the strength of association between constructive interparental conflict and emotional security would be weaker, as constructive conflict would have less added value to foster children's felt security. On the contrary, when parents exhibited a *high* level of disintegration avoidance, then increasing levels of constructive interparental conflict behaviors would be more prominent to enhance children's emotional security.

The Present Study

The present study examined the role of disintegration avoidance and constructive interparental conflict associated with children's emotional security, internalizing problems, and externalizing problems. To date, an extensive body of research conducted in different cultures has offered compelling evidence on the link between interparental conflict and adolescents' emotional security (e.g., Cummings et al., 2010; Cummings et al., 2012; Li et al., 2016). Despite the recent advances made in the Western context, to our

knowledge, the mediating role of emotional security between interparental conflict and young children's behavioral adjustment has not been investigated in East Asian contexts. Beyond the documentation of child adjustment outcomes, process-oriented research is essential to delineate the underlying pathways for adjustment (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1996), particularly in early childhood, as these periods are significant in laying the groundwork for children's later development (Campbell et al., 2000).

Despite the mixed findings between constructive conflict and emotional security (e.g., Davies et al., 2012; Cummings et al., 2003), in this study we hypothesized that emotional security would mediate the relation between constructive interparental conflict and child adjustment, including internalizing and externalizing problems, given the theoretical basis of EST (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Given that interpersonal harmony is highly valued in Chinese societies (Bond, 2010), neglecting its role may lead to an incomplete understanding about parent-child relations in this context. Therefore, grounded in DMH (Leung et al., 2002), we further hypothesized that disintegration avoidance would moderate the mediation process. That is, when parents exhibited a low level of disintegration avoidance, then the strength of association between constructive interparental conflict and emotional security would be weaker. When parents exhibited a high level of disintegration avoidance, then strength of association between constructive interparental conflict and emotional security would be stronger. By adding disintegration avoidance to the picture, we sought to offer a more complete approach to the understanding of family dynamics and child development. Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of the study.

Method

Participants

Participants were 70 parents in Hong Kong (44 mothers and 26 fathers) at 38.40 average years of age (SD = 4.87) recruited via online platforms, including Facebook advertisements and mass emails. Children (32 girls and 38 boys) of the participating parents had a mean age of 4.83 years old (SD = 1.90). Parents were eligible to participate if they were martially-intact and had a child of at least 3 years old. For parents who had more than one child of above 3 years old, they were asked to select the youngest child as the focus of their participation. Participating mothers and fathers did not differ in reporting the variables under study, except for children's emotional security, $t(91) = -2.86$, $p < .01$ (M_{mother} = 4.37, SD = .51; M_{father}

= 4.03, *SD* = .58). The online study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee prior to its implementation. Informed consent was obtained prior to the administration of the survey.

Measures

Disintegration Avoidance

Participants completed the 8-item disintegration avoidance subscale of the Harmony Scale (HS; Leung et al., 2011) on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The measure was developed and validated in samples of Chinese and Australian and yielded good construct validity, discriminant validity, and internal consistency (Leung et al., 2011). The Chinese version of the measure was used. Sample items included, "In order to maintain harmony, people might have to give up principles of justice in handling matters" and "Interacting harmoniously with people prevents them from giving you trouble in the future." The item scores were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater disintegration avoidance. The measure had adequate internal consistency in this study, with Cronbach's alpha = .75.

Constructive Interparental Conflict

The 30-item Leveling, Editing, and Validation subscales of the Managing Affect and Differences Scale (MADS; Arellano & Markman, 1995) was used to measure participants' constructive interparental conflict on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The Leveling subscale assessed whether participants and their spouse discussed their feelings or thoughts constructively and clearly, particularly in times of challenges and conflict. The Editing subscale assessed whether participants and their spouse kept their reactions under control by editing out negative responses (e.g., insulting or nagging) and delivering their messages in a positive manner. The Validation subscale assessed whether participants and their spouse expressed value in each other's perspective through active listening and paraphrasing. Following the back-translation procedures (Brislin, 1970), the measure was translated from English to Chinese by trained, independent research assistants. Sample items included, "When I feel hurt by my partner, I tell him/her" (Leveling), "I try to interact positively" (Editing), and "I try to understand my partners' complaint" (Validation). To ensure the measure is valid for use in the Chinese context, confirmatory analyses were conducted for each subscale using the current data. Altogether, the range of the fit statistics were as follows: chi-square/df ratio = 1.72 - 1.83; CFI = .91 - .97; TLI = .88 - .94, SRMR = .05 - .09. The factor loadings were all significant at *p*s < .05. As indicated by correlations between subscales (*r*s

= .60 to .78, *p*s < .001), the effect sizes were large (Cohen, 1988). As such, the item scores were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater constructive conflict tactics. The subscales demonstrated good internal consistency in this study, with Cronbach's alpha ranged from .89 to .90.

Children's Emotional Security

The 33-item Security in the Marital Subsystem-Parent Report Inventory (SIMS-PR, Davies et al., 2002b) was completed by parents to assess children's emotional security in interparental relations on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*a whole lot like him/her*) to 5 (*not at all like him/her*). Parents reported their children's reactions toward interparental conflict, with subscales including Emotional Reactivity, Behavioral Dysregulation, Dismissing, Involvement in Conflict, and Avoidance. Sample items included, "Upon witnessing arguments between you and your partner during the past year, your child 'appears frightened' (Emotional Reactivity), 'starts hitting, kicking, slapping, or throwing things at family members' (Behavioral Dysregulation), 'acts as if he or she doesn't care' (Dismissing), 'gets involved in the argument' (Involvement in Conflict), and 'tries to stay away from us' (Avoidance)." Following the back-translation procedures (Brislin, 1970), the measure was translated from English to Chinese by trained, independent research assistants. The adolescent measure of emotional security has been validated in a Chinese sample and demonstrated cultural validity and reliability (Li et al., 2016). To ensure the measure is valid for use in the Chinese context, confirmatory analyses were conducted for each subscale using the current data. Altogether, the range of the fit statistics were as follows: chi-square/df ratio = .75 - 1.73; CFI = .93 - 1.00; TLI = .89 - 1.01, SRMR = .03 - .06. The factor loadings were all significant at *p*s < .05. Based on the moderate correlations between subscales (*r*s = .31 to .70, *p*s < .001, except between Involvement in Conflict and Dismissing, $r = .21$, $p = .08$), the item scores were reversed and averaged, with higher scores indicating greater overall emotional security. Alpha coefficients for this study ranged from .74 to .92 across the subscales.

Children's Internalizing and Externalizing Problems

The Chinese version of the 20-item Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997) was used to assess children's internalizing problems and externalizing problems on a three-point scale from 0 (*not true*) to 2 (*certainly true*). The Chinese version has been validated in Hong Kong and yielded adequate discriminant validity, internal consistency, and test-retest reliability (Lai et al., 2010).

Sample items included, “My child has many worries or often seems worried” (Internalizing Problems), and “My child often fights with other children or bullies them” (Externalizing Problems). The measure yielded adequate internal consistency with Cronbach’s alpha = .75 and .76 for the Internalizing Problems and Externalizing Problems subscales, respectively.

Analytic Strategy

Zero-order correlations, means, and standard deviations were examined for all variables under study. To examine the mediation model, a single-group path analysis was conducted using MPLUS (Version 7; Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012). Specifically, children’s emotional security was entered as a mediator between constructive interparental conflict and child outcomes, including internalizing and externalizing problems. Children’s gender and family monthly income were added as control variables for child functioning.

To examine disintegration avoidance as a moderator of the mediation model, a model comparison approach was used. Specifically, parents’ disintegration avoidance was categorized into 0 = low disintegration avoidance and 1 = high disintegration avoidance based on the median split. This categorization fit the present research aims and the same analytic method was used in previous research on family process and child adjustment (e.g., Buehler & Welsh, 2009; Cheung & Park, 2010; Li et al., 2016). Specifically, a multi-group path analysis was conducted to examine the moderated mediation model. In the first step, all parameters were freely estimated between individuals with high vs low disintegration avoidance. In the following 15 steps, the χ^2 and model fit were assessed after constraining each additional parameter estimate to be invariant between groups. In each step, if the χ^2 difference between the additionally constrained model and its preceding model was non-significant, then the simpler model with the constrained path estimate would be selected due to parsimony. That is, the simpler model without moderation of disintegration avoidance would be selected. Bootstrapping was used to test the mediating effects, as the method enabled us to yield more accurate estimates of the indirect effect standard errors than did other approaches (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). All the question items were endorsed by the participants, that is, the present study did not involve any missing data.

Follow-up analyses were conducted to test (a) the reverse direction of effects in the multi-group model and (b) disintegration avoidance as a continuous moderator between interparental conflict and

emotional security. To examine disintegration avoidance as a continuous moderator, disintegration avoidance, constructive interparental conflict, and the interaction term were used to predict the mediating variable, children's emotional security. This way, the main effects and interaction effect of the predictors could be thoroughly examined. Emotional security was then entered to predict child outcomes, including internalizing and externalizing problems. To create the interaction term, disintegration avoidance and constructive interparental conflict were centered to the mean to facilitate interpretability of the findings. Next, the centered variables were multiplied to form the interaction term. Children's gender and family monthly income were added as control variables for child functioning. Post hoc simple slopes analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) were conducted to determine the differences between the slope coefficients when disintegration avoidance was low (i.e., 1 *SD* below the mean) vs high (i.e., 1 *SD* above the mean).

Results

Table 1 shows the zero-order correlations, means, and standard deviations for all study variables.

Single-group Analysis

The single-group path analysis yielded a saturated model. Children's emotional security predicted fewer internalizing problems (β = -.39, B = -2.45, *SE* = .66, $p < .001$) and externalizing problems (β = -.39, B = -2.88, *SE* = .82, $p < .001$). However, constructive interparental conflict did not predict children's emotional security, internalizing problems, and externalizing problems, ps > .05. As for the covariates, boys had more internalizing problems (β = -.22, B = -1.38, *SE* = .69, $p < .05$).

Multi-group Analysis: Disintegration Avoidance as a Categorical Moderator

Table 2 indicates all the steps taken to examine the moderating role of disintegration avoidance of the mediation model. In step 1, allowing all path coefficients to differ between groups yielded a saturated model (model 1.1). In the next 12 steps, the χ^2 differences and model fit were assessed after constraining each additional parameter estimate to be invariant between groups. The final model yielded satisfactory fit to the data, χ^2 (10) = 12.80, $p > .05$; CFI = .95; RMSEA = .09. Group similarities were demonstrated except for two paths. Specifically, the relation between constructive conflict and emotional security was significantly stronger for parents with high disintegration avoidance (β = .30, B = .31, *SE* = .15, $p < .05$) than for parents with low disintegration avoidance (β = -.24, B = -.31, *SE* = .21, $p > .05$). Additionally, boys had greater emotional security when parents' disintegration avoidance was high (β = -.29, B = -.28, *SE* =

.15, *p* , .05) but not when parents' disintegration avoidance was low (β = .18, B = .20, *SE* = .18, *p* < .001). Despite the group differences in these path coefficients, findings demonstrated universality in that all other path coefficients were similar between groups (see Table 3 and Figure 2 for further details).

Based on 10000 bootstrap samples with replacement, the 95% confidence interval CI indicated that for parents with high disintegration avoidance, the unstandardized indirect effects of constructive conflict on children's internalizing problems (CI: [-1.69, -.04]) and externalizing problems (CI: [-1.95, -.09]) did not include zeros, respectively. Likewise, the standardized indirect effects of the interaction between interparental conflict and disintegration avoidance on children's internalizing problems (CI: [-.27, -.02]) and externalizing problems (CI: [.24, -.03]) did not include zeros, respectively, thereby suggesting that emotional security was a mediator.

Based on 10000 bootstrap samples with replacement, the 95% CI indicated that for parents with low disintegration avoidance, the unstandardized indirect effects of constructive conflict on children's internalizing problems (CI: [-.13, 2.42]) and externalizing problems (CI: [-.12, 2.78]) included zeros , respectively). Likewise, the standardized indirect effects of constructive conflict on children's internalizing problems (CI: [-.02, .28]) and externalizing problems (CI: [-.01, .30]) included zeros, thereby suggesting that emotional security was not a mediator.

Follow-up Analysis—Testing Reversed Direction of Effects

Although the cross-sectional nature of the data precluded us from inferring directionality, we investigated the reversed direction of effects of child outcomes on constructive interparental conflict via emotional security in single-group and multi-group path analyses using the same procedures described in the previous section.

For the single-group analysis, the model could not be identified, thereby suggesting model misspecification and misidentification. As for the multi-group analysis, allowing all path coefficients to differ between groups yielded a saturated model. However, constraining the path coefficients to be equal between groups in the subsequent models yielded misidentifications, thereby suggesting model misspecification. Consequently, a reversed directionality of effects was not supported.

Follow-up Analysis—Testing Disintegration Avoidance as a Continuous Moderator

The path analysis yielded a saturated model. Although neither interparental conflict nor disintegration avoidance was associated with emotional security (*p*s > .05), the interaction term predicted emotional security (β = .30, B = .52, *SE* = .22, *p* < .05). Children's emotional security further predicted fewer internalizing problems (β = -.387, B = -2.38, *SE* = .69, *p* < .001) and externalizing problems (β = -.36, B = -2.70, *SE* = .83, *p* = .001). As for the covariates, boys had more internalizing problems (β = -.21, B = -1.34, *SE* = .68, *p* < .05).

Based on 10000 bootstrap samples with replacement, the 95% CI indicated that the unstandardized indirect effects of the interaction between interparental conflict and disintegration avoidance on children's internalizing problems (CI: [-3.50, -.28]) and externalizing problems (CI: [-4.27, -.39]) did not include zeros, respectively. Likewise, the standardized indirect effects of the interaction between interparental conflict and disintegration avoidance on children's internalizing problems (CI: [-.27, -.03]) and externalizing problems (CI: [-.24, -.03]) did not include zeros, respectively, thereby suggesting that emotional security was a mediator.

Although interparental conflict interacted with disintegration avoidance to predict emotional security, post hoc simple slopes analysis showed neither slopes to be significantly different from zero (*p*s > .05). However, the relation between constructive interparental conflict and emotional security did reveal a positive trend when disintegration avoidance was high (i.e., 1 *SD* above the mean), B = .32, *SE* = .18, *p* = .07). Figure 3 depicts the simple slopes findings.

Discussion

Grounded in EST (Davies & Cummings, 1994) and DMH (Leung et al., 2002), the present study calls attention to the role of disintegration avoidance and interparental conflict behaviors in children's functioning. Significant pathways emerged to suggest emotional security as a mediator between constructive interparental conflict and children's externalizing problems, but only when parents reported a high level of disintegration avoidance, that is, when parents had a high tendency to preserve harmony by avoiding actions that may terminate or strain a relationship. Nevertheless, regardless of the level of disintegration avoidance, children's emotional security was associated with both internalizing and externalizing problems. As discussed below, findings of the present study enhance our knowledge about

emotional security in the Chinese context and demonstrated the relevance of disintegration avoidance in the process between constructive interparental conflict and children's functioning.

The present findings were, in part, consistent with recent studies showing a significant relation between constructive interparental conflict and emotional security (e.g., Cheung et al., 2016; McCoy et al.; 2013; Zhou & Buehler, 2017). Specifically, we found that the interparental conflict-children's security link was significant when parents' disintegration avoidance was high. That is, our evidence suggested that constructive conflict was positively associated with emotional security *only* when parents exhibited high disintegration avoidance.

The negative atmosphere cultivated by parents' longstanding beliefs of disintegration avoidance in "riding the tide" and giving up principles of justice in order to preserve harmony contrasted with their constructive interparental conflict tactics. Although disintegration avoidance in and of itself does not carry any negative implications, particularly when it is balanced with harmony enhancement strategies (see also Leung et al., 2002, p. 213), high levels of disintegration avoidance rooted in self-concern entails a strong preference of conflict avoidance, yielding, and face saving (Leung et al., 2002). Although conflict avoidance is only one of the means to avoid the disintegration of relationships (Leung et al., 2011, p. 812), families with high levels of conflict avoidance, capitulation, and hidden competitive behaviors can generate a negative background atmosphere. Under this atmosphere, children may still thrive to become secure when their parents demonstrated greater constructive conflict strategies, such as better listening skills and ability to respond positively . These findings resonated with Zhou and Buehler's (2017) study, in that parents' effective conflict resolution interacted with marital hostility to predict children's reduced perceived threat. In the face of a potentially negative environment with high parental disintegration avoidance, parents' constructive behaviors emerge as a prominent predictor to facilitate children's security.

When disintegration avoidance was low with few conflict avoidance behaviors, constructive conflict tactics were not significantly related to emotional security. That is, these children did not feel more secure when they encountered a greater level of constructive interparental conflict. In fact, the null findings also applied to the single group analysis. Regardless of the level of disintegration avoidance, constructive conflict alone did not foster emotional security. The null findings were consistent with the literature that demonstrated a nonsignificant association between constructive conflict and child adjustment (Brock &

Kochanska, 2016; Coln et al., 2013; Davies et al., 2012). These findings echoed with recent findings (Davies & Sturge-Apple, 2007; Davies et al., 2012; Davies & Woitach, 2008), which suggested that children's strategies for preserving emotional security are largely organized around their social defense system. That is, to defend against social threat such as destructive interparental conflict, children become more insecure with greater levels of emotional reactivity, behavioral dysregulation, dismissing, avoidance, and/or involvement in conflict. On the contrary, when children do not experience social threat that they need to defend against (e.g., low conflict avoidance, as demonstrated by low disintegration avoidance), constructive interparental conflict alone failed to predict children's emotional security.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present findings must be interpreted in light of several limitations, which point to directions for future studies. First, a healthy balance of both disintegration avoidance and harmony enhancement may be necessary to foster harmony (Leung et al., 2002). However, the current study only investigated disintegration avoidance as a negative dimension of harmony, given that it is moderately associated with conflict avoidance (Leung et al., 2011), i.e., a negative conflict strategy. Future studies should examine the moderating role of both behaviors to more fully address how harmony is related to family dynamics and child adjustment. Second, the study was cross-sectional. As such, neither directionality nor causality can be inferred. Future studies should examine the relations longitudinally to establish their temporal sequence and experimentally to establish causality. Second, the variables were assessed through self-report questionnaires. Future studies should utilize multiple reports and multiple assessment methods, including physiological measures, behavioral observations, and self- and other-questionnaire reports. Relatedly, we utilized MADS (Arellano & Markman, 1995) as a measure of constructive conflict and the SDQ (Goodman, 1997) to measure internalizing and externalizing problems. Other measures of constructive conflict and child adjustment, such as the Conflict and Problem Solving Scales (CPS; Kerig, 1996) and the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991), may be added to more objectively assess these constructs. Third, due to the constraints related to the study timeline, we were only able to recruit 70 parents of children in early childhood, with 44 mothers and 26 fathers. The null findings may be due, in part, to a low statistical power. Consequently, findings must be interpreted with caution. Future research

should expand the sample size and recruit a gender-balanced sample of parents to increase power. To reduce biases, a structural equation model should also be conducted. Along the same lines, given the small sample, we were unable to control for the covariates or confounds, such as destructive conflict tactics, other cultural values (e.g., face concern; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003), interpersonal trust, parenting stress, economic stress, and parents' gender, all of which deserves attention in future research. For example, assessing constructive and destructive conflict together can enhance our understanding on the association between conflict and child adjustment (Coln et al., 2013; Davies et al., 2012; Zemp et al., 2014). Without the inclusion of destructive conflict, findings may be less conclusive and require further replications. As such, future work is necessary to tease apart the role of covariates and third variables in the relation between culture, interparental conflict, and child adjustment.

Conclusion

The present study adds to the growing literature on the association between constructive interparental conflict and child development. Findings revealed the relevance of disintegration avoidance in the process between constructive conflict and child adjustment. Based on EST (Davies & Cummings, 1994) and DMH (Leung et al., 2002), researchers and practitioners should emphasize the importance of constructive conflict tactics in children's externalizing problems, particularly in working with families exhibiting high levels of disintegration avoidance. Although the findings are informative to collectivistic cultures that highly value harmony, they are also relevant to individualistic cultures, as harmony is a universal value that can be found in all cultures (Leung et al., 2011). A take-home message is that both the family and the larger cultural context are imperative to child adjustment. It is vital to not only examine the why and the how, but also for whom and when constructive and destructive family processes govern child adjustment.

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Figure 1

Conceptual Moderated Mediation Model of Constructive Interparental Conflict, Emotional Security, and Children's Internalizing and Externalizing Problems, with Parents' Disintegration Avoidance as Moderator

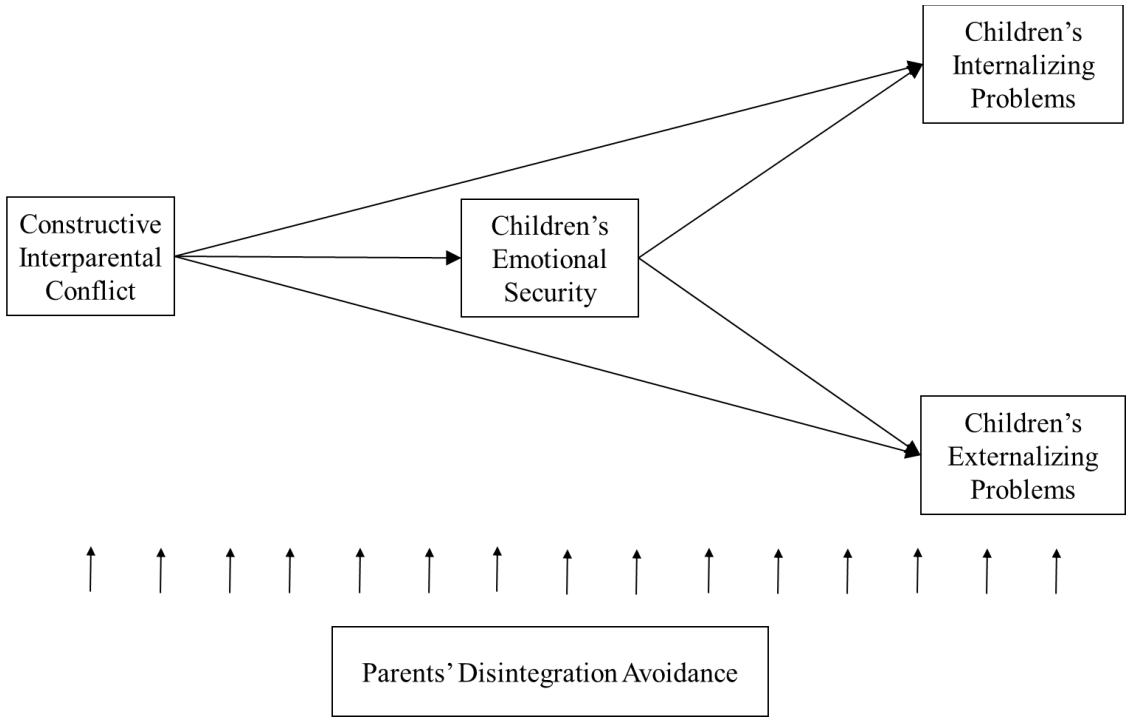
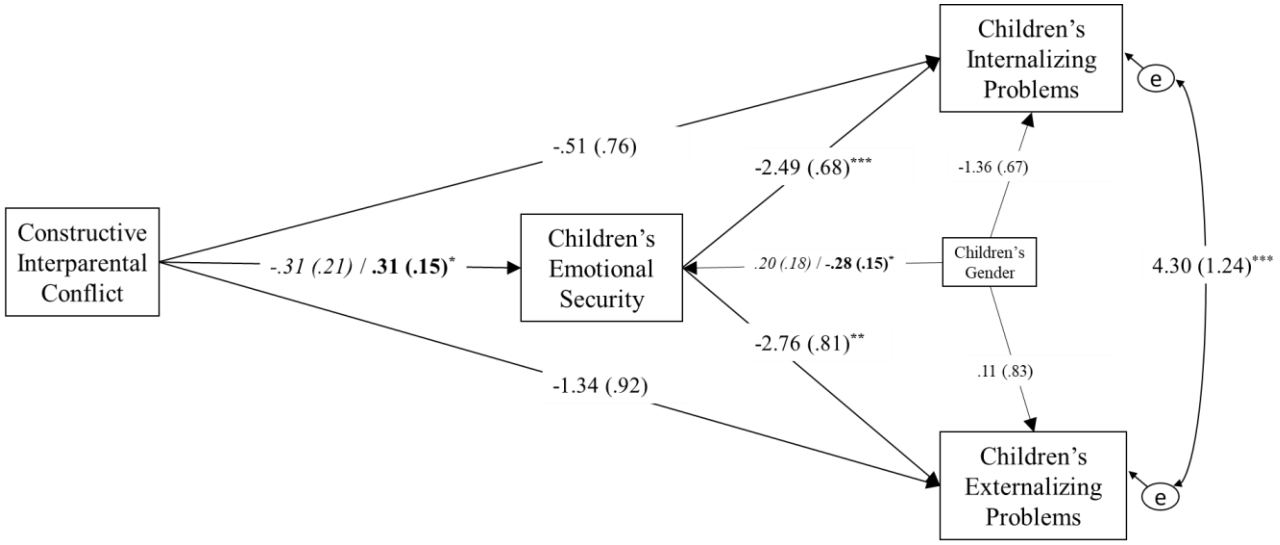


Figure 2

Path Model of Constructive Interparental Conflict and Child Adjustment: Moderating Role of Parents' Disintegration Avoidance



Notes. Direct effects of interparental conflict behaviors on child adjustment issues are included to assess the mediation effect of emotional security. Plain coefficients indicate the unstandardized coefficients and

standard errors were constrained between parents with low vs. high disintegration avoidance. Italicized and bold coefficients indicate the unstandardized coefficients and standard errors for parents with low and high disintegration avoidance, respectively. Family income was also included as a control variable for children's functioning, but is not depicted to improve clarity (see Table 3 for further details).

Figure 3

Simple Slopes between Constructive Interparental Conflict and Emotional Security by Parents' Disintegration Avoidance

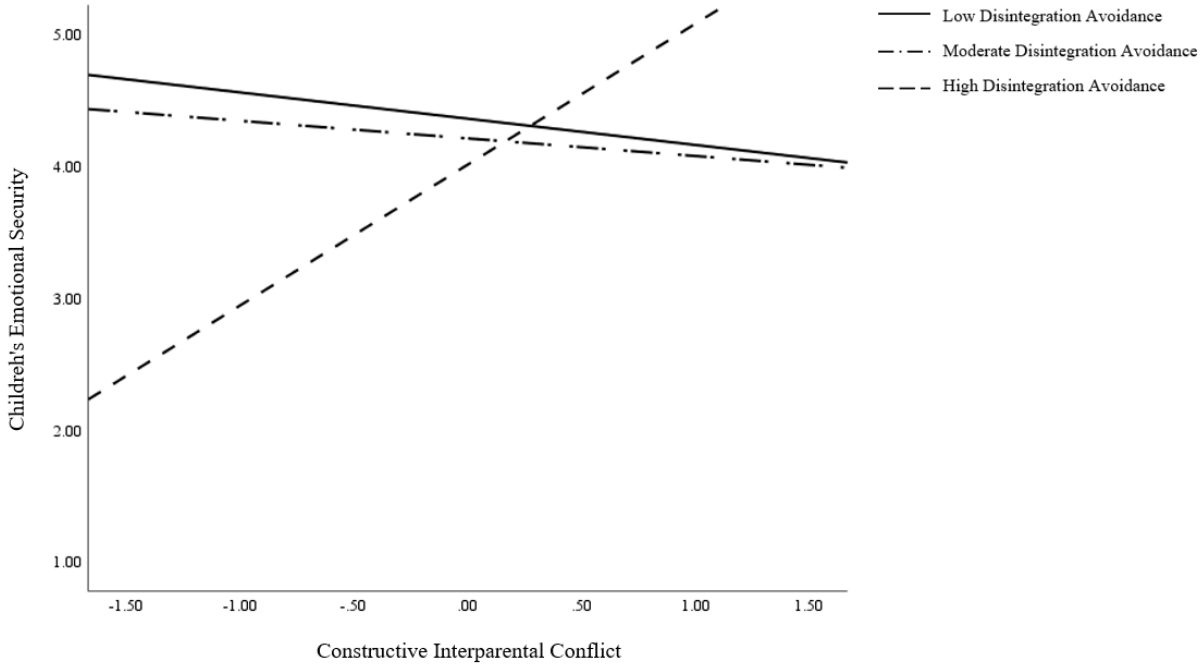


Table 1

Zero-Order Correlations, Means, And SDs of the Variables under Study

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)
(1) Children's gender (0 = male; 1 = female)	-														
(2) Parents' gender (0 = male; 1 = female)	-.07	-													
(3) Children's age	.18	-.07	-												
(4) Family monthly income (US$)	.06	.21	.26**	-											
(5) Parents' disintegration avoidance	.14	-.01	.08	-.04	-										
(6) Parents' leveling	.01	-.02	.14	.02	-.18	-									
(7) Parent's editing	-.03	-.06	.12	-.10	-.14	.60***	-								
(8) Parents' validation	-.05	.00	.09	-.06	-.15	.70***	.78***	-							
(9) ES: Emotional reactivity	-.07	.37**	-.35**	.31**	.20	-.16	-.17	.03	-						
(10) ES: Conflict involvement	-.00	.21	-.16	.05	-.19	-.08	-.21	-.11	.48***	-					
(11) ES: Behavioral dysregulation	-.13	.19	-.22	.16	.09	.02	-.09	.14	.70***	.38**	-				
(12) ES: Avoidance	.06	.35**	-.30*	.13	.00	.01	.05	.07	.64***	.46***	.39***	-			
(13) ES: Dismissing	.08	.16	-.07	.08	.00	.06	.15	.22	.42***	.21	.31**	.61***	-		
(14) Children's internalizing problems	-.21	.04	.18	-.19	-.08	-.04	-.02	-.08	-.37**	-.00	-.38**	-.40**	-.43***	-	

(15) Children's externalizing problems	.03	-.06	.27*	-.16	-.20	-.16	-.07	-.15	-.40**	-.10	-.46***	-.32**	-.23	.53***	-
M	-	-	4.83	5618	2.90	3.85	3.84	3.78	4.26	3.81	4.23	4.39	4.34	5.27	7.61
SD	-	-	1.90	1737	1.38	.47	.48	.60	.68	.72	.72	.60	.71	3.21	3.84

Note. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$. ES = Children's emotional security.

Table 2

Summary Statistics for Models Tested between Parents with High vs. Low Disintegration Avoidance

Model fit and comparison	χ^2	*df*	*p*	CFI	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi 2$	Δdf	*p*
Unconstrained coefficients (1.1)	0	0	0	1.00	0	-	-	-
Path equivalence (2.1)	5.074	1	<.05	.92	.34	5.074	1	<.05
Path equivalence (2.2)	.01	1	>.05	1.00	.00	.260	1	*ns*
Path equivalence (2.3)	3.023	2	<.05	.98	.12	3.13	1	*ns*
Path equivalence (2.4)	4.193	3	>.05	.98	.11	1.17	1	*ns*
Path equivalence (2.5)	4.215	4	>.05	1.00	.04	.022	1	*ns*
Path equivalence (2.6)	8.445	5	> .05	.93	.14	4.23	1	<.05
Path equivalence (2.7)	5.277	5	> .05	1.00	.04	1.062	1	*ns*
Path equivalence (2.8)	6.585	6	> .05	.99	.05	1.308	1	*ns*
Path equivalence (2.9)	8.530	7	> .05	.97	.08	1.945	1	*ns*
Path equivalence (2.10)	10.722	8	> .05	.95	.10	2.192	1	*ns*
Path equivalence (2.11)	12.791	9	> .05	.93	.11	2.069	1	*ns*
Path equivalence (2.12)	12.800	10	> .05	.95	.09	.009	1	*ns*

Note.
1.1 Baseline saturated model with unconstrained path coefficients between groups
Coefficients of the following paths were constrained to be equal between groups
2.1 Constructive interparental conflict and children's emotional security
2.2 (i) Children's emotional security and externalizing problems
2.3 (ii) Children's emotional security and internalizing problems
2.4 (i), (ii), and (iii) Constructive interparental conflict and children's internalizing problems
2.5 (i), (ii) and (iii) Constructive interparental conflict and children's externalizing problems
2.9 (i)-(vi) and (vii) Children's emotional security and children's gender
2.10 (i)-(vi) and (viii) Children's internalizing problems and children's gender
2.11 (i)-(vi), (viii), and (ix) Children's externalizing problems and children's gender
2.12 (i)-(vi), (viii), (ix), and (x) Children's emotional security and family income
2.13 (i)-(vi), (viii)-(x), and (xi) Children's internalizing problems and family income
2.14 (i)-(vi), (viii)-(xi), and (xii) Children's externalizing problems and family income
2.15 (i)- (vi), (viii)-(xii), and (xiii) Error covariance between children's internalizing and externalizing problems

Table 3

Unstandardized Parameter Estimates, Standard Errors, and Standardized Parameter Estimates between Parents with Low vs. High Disintegration Avoidance in the Multi-group Path Model

Parameter	Unstandardized estimates (*SE*)	Standardized β
Constructive interparental conflict		
→ Children's emotional security	-.31 (.21) / **.31 (.15)**	-.24 / **.30***
→ Children's internalizing problems	-.51 (.76) / **-.51 (.76)**	-.07 / **-.07**
→ Children's externalizing problems	-1.34 (.92) / **-1.34 (.92)**	-.16 / **-.15**
Children's emotional security		
→ Children's internalizing problems	-2.49 (.68) / **-2.49 (.68)**	-.42*** / **-.38*****
→ Children's externalizing problems	-.2.76 (.81) / **-.2.76 (.81)**	-.42*** / **-.33****
Children's gender		
→ Children's emotional security	.20 (.18) / **-.28 (.15)**	.18 / **-.29***
→ Children's internalizing problems	-1.36 (.67) / **-1.36 (.67)**	-.21 / **-.21**
→ Children's externalizing problems	.11 (.83) / **-.11 (.83)**	-.02 / **-.01**
Family monthly income		
→ Children's emotional security	.08 (.04) / **.08 (.04)**	.19 / **.24**
→ Children's internalizing problems	-.30 (.25) / **-.30 (.25)**	-.12 / **-.14**
→ Children's externalizing problems	-.25 (.32) / **-.25 (.32)**	-.09 / **-.09**
Error Covariance		
Internalizing problems ←→ Externalizing problems	4.30 (1.24) / 4.30 **(1.24)**	.51*** / **.41*****

Note. Unstandardized parameter estimates, standard errors in parentheses, and standardized parameter estimates are shown in plain for parents low in disintegration avoidance and in **bold** for parents high in disintegration avoidance. Underlined paths indicate that the loadings were not constrained between groups. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.