

Actor-Partner Interdependence Model of Associations between Marital and Parent-Child Relationship Quality in Families of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder



Emily J. Hickey, Sigan L. Hartley, and Shari Blumenstock
University of Wisconsin-Madison



Introduction

- The family systems perspective theorizes that the quality of the marital relationship is connected to parenting experiences in meaningful ways.
- Actor-Partner Interdependence Models (Cook & Kenny, 2005) provide a unique perspective into relationships because they use dyads, such as married couples, as the unit of analysis. The model allows for examination of how an individual's experiences and well-being affect both their own outcomes (actor effect) as well as their partners outcomes (partner effect).
- Expressed emotion in five minute speech samples provides a method for assessing *warmth* and *criticism* toward a child or spouse and has been shown to be associated with these qualities in actual interactions (Beck, Hastings, Daley, & Stevenson, 2004; Hastings et al., 2006).
- The current study aims to take a family systems perspective to investigate the cross-over between spouses expressed *warmth* and *criticism* towards their child and marital outcomes as well as their expressed *warmth* and *criticism* towards their spouse and parenting outcomes, as the family systems perspective suggests that all features and relationships in a family will affect the system as a whole, translating to an impact on other features and relationships in the family system.

Study Aims

- 1) Examine how one's own (i.e., actor) and one's partner's level of warmth and criticism in a five minute speech sample about their *child* with ASD relates to their level of marital quality.
- 2) Examine how one's own (i.e. actor) and one's partner's level of warmth and criticism in a five minute speech sample about their *spouse* relates to their level of parenting stress.

Methods

Participants

- 79 married couples aged 25-65 years ($M = 43.34$ years, $SD = 8.08$) that have a child with ASD aged 3-20 years ($M = 11.84$ years, $SD = 4.9$; 77% male; 38% ID)
- 93.9% Caucasian, non-Hispanic
- 65.2% Bachelor's degree or higher
- Relationship length: 2-33 years ($M = 18.63$ years, $SD = 7.38$)
- Household income: \$20K-\$160K+ ($M = \$80K$ -\$89K; $SD = \$30K$)

Measures

- Warmth and Criticism:** number of comments from 2 five minute speech samples, one about one's child and one about one's spouse (Magaña et al., 1986)
- Example comment indicating **warmth**: "He works hard and, in a very selfless way, to take care of us and make sure that everybody has what they need. I mean, he's generous with his time and with his energy." – mother of child with ASD about her spouse
 - Example comment indicating **criticism**: "She is not affectionate, and sometimes insensitive to how I might feel about things in a way where there's times where I just feel that she doesn't care about my feelings in situations." – father of a child with ASD about his spouse

Marital Satisfaction: Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959) $\alpha = .67$

- Example: "Do you confide in your mate?" (almost never, rarely, in most things, in everything)

Parenting Stress: Burden Interview (Pburd; Zarit, Reever, & Bach-Peterson, 1980) $\alpha = .86$

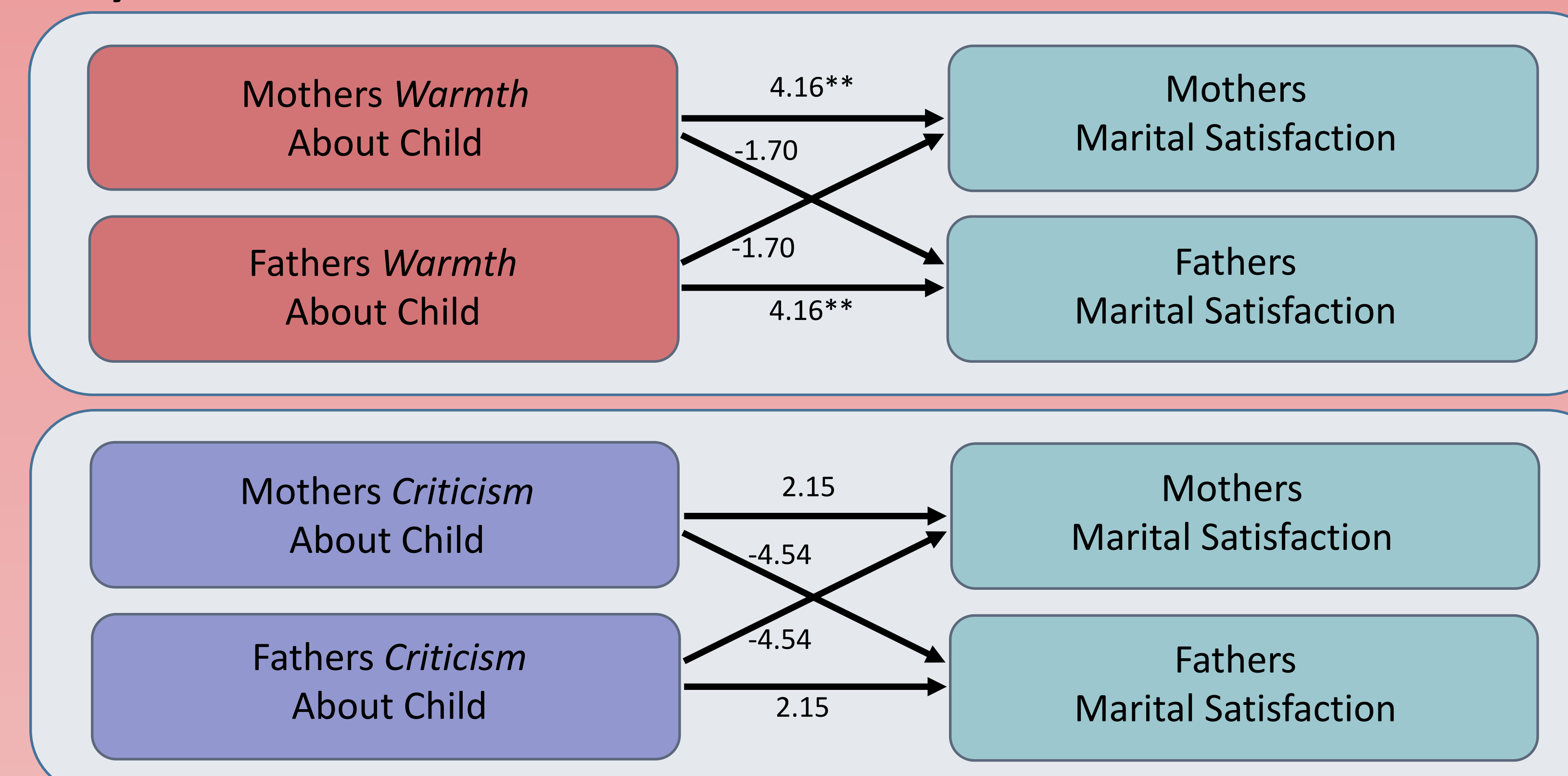
- Example: "Do you feel embarrassed about your child's behavior?" (never, rarely, sometimes, quite frequently, nearly always)

Plan for Analysis

Multilevel models were created using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) software to account for the dyadic nature of the data and allow for the investigation of Actor-Partner Interdependence Models. Individual covariates included in the model were parent age, gender, race/ethnicity, and level of education. Couple level covariates included in the model were relationship length, household income, and child's age, gender, intellectual disability status, and level of ASD symptoms and behavior problems.

Results

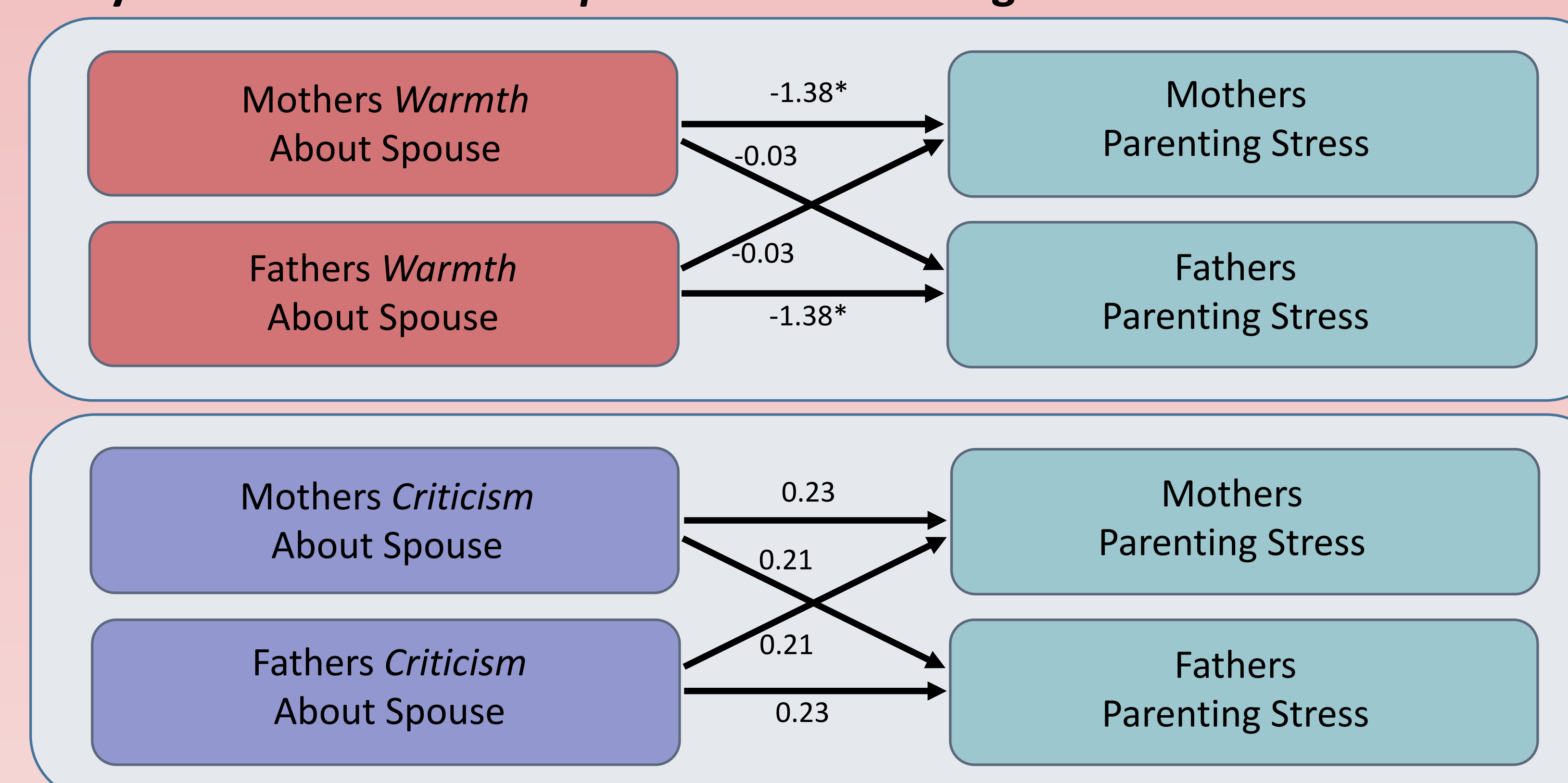
Study Aim 1: FMSS about *Child* and Marital Satisfaction



* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

- Parents who expressed more *warmth* about their child with ASD reported higher levels of marital satisfaction.
- Partner levels of *warmth* and *criticism* were not associated with marital satisfaction.
- *Criticism* was not associated with marital satisfaction.

Study Aim 2: FMSS about *Spouse* and Parenting Stress



* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

- Parents who expressed more *warmth* about their spouse reported lower levels of parenting stress.
- Partner levels of *warmth* and *criticism* were not associated with parenting stress.
- *Criticism* was not associated with parenting stress.

Discussion

- The current study is one of few to investigate the connections between the marital relationship and the parent-child relationship in families of children with ASD.
- **Focus on Actor Effects:** Results from this study give us a better sense of how the individual feelings and characteristics of parents effect family outcomes and functioning. Actor effects were found to be stronger predictors of well-being, as no significant partner effects were found in the association between *warmth* or *criticism* and marital satisfaction or parenting stress. Cognitive behavioral therapy or other forms of psychotherapy that focus on individual thoughts and behaviors may be beneficial to parents of children with ASD.
- **Focus on Warmth:** While *warmth* was significantly associated with higher marital satisfaction and lower parenting stress, no significant association was found between *criticism* and marital satisfaction or parenting stress. This finding suggests that supports for parents of children with ASD that aim to increase marital satisfaction and/or decrease parenting stress should focus on levels of *warmth*.

Efforts to increase *warmth* may be more beneficial than efforts to decrease *criticism*.

Future Directions

- Future studies should examine potential differences between mothers and fathers levels of expressed *warmth* and *criticism* and the relationship to marital satisfaction and parenting stress. It may also be beneficial to include a comparison group of married couples of families of typically developing children or of children with other developmental disabilities.

References

- Beck, A., Hastings, R. P., Daley, D., & Stevenson, J. (2004). Pro-social behaviour and behaviour problems independently predict maternal stress. *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability*, 29, 339–349.
- Cook, W. L., & Kenny, D. A. (2005). The actor–partner interdependence model: A model of bidirectional effects in developmental studies. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 29(2), 101-109.
- Hastings, R. P., & Lloyd, T. (2007). Expressed emotion in families of children and adults with intellectual disabilities. *Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Research Reviews*, 13, 339 –345.
- Locke, H. J., & Wallace, K. M. (1959). Short marital adjustment and prediction tests: Their reliability and validity. *Marriage and Family Living*, 21, 251–255.
- Magaña, A. B., Goldstein, M. J., Karno, M., Miklowitz, D. J., Jenkins, J., & Falloon, I. R. (1986). A brief method for assessing expressed emotion in relatives of psychiatric patients. *Psychiatry research*, 17(3), 203-212.
- Zarit, S. H., Reever, K. E., & Bach-Peterson, J. (1980). Relatives of the impaired elderly: Correlates of feelings of burden. *The Gerontologist*, 20(6), 649-655.

Acknowledgements

University of Wisconsin-Madison, Graduate School
(Hartley PPRJ48QN; NIH R01MH099190 to S Hartley)

Correspondence

Emily J. Hickey ejhickey2@wisc.edu