ABSTRACT

Nearly half of adults in the U.S. indicated they had a close step-relative that included stepparents, stepchildren, and other close relationships. The prevalence of stepfamilies is rapidly increasing and represents a population that remains largely understudied. This study explored the roles of socioemotional behaviors (positivity, negativity, and sexual interest) on marital stability for different remarriage constellations (depending which of the couple, both partners, or neither had previous children). This study uses dyadic relationship data from 879 couples. It was hypothesized that positivity and sexual interest would be inversely related with marital instability, while negativity will be correlated with marital instability.

Keywords

Remarriage, Stepfamily, Positivity, Negativity, Sexual Interest, Stepchildren, Divorce, Stepfather, Stepmother, Marital Stability

Associations Between Relationship Maintenance Behaviors and Marital Stability in

Remarriages

In the United States, 42% of adults indicated they had a close step-relative that

included stepparents, stepchildren, and other close relationships (Pew Research Center,

2011). Individuals under 30 years of age reported numbers as high as 52%. Further, data

suggests these numbers are likely to increase as 36% of individuals under 30 claimed

their parents divorced, separated, or were never married (compared to 21% for ages 30-

49 years, and 10% for those over 50).

Given the understudied prevalence of step-families, the current paper assessed the

experiences of partners for whom the union represents a remarriage for at least one

member of the couple. This is important as marital functioning is said to meet intimacy

and security needs better than other relationships (McCarthy & Ginsberg, 2007) and

healthy romantic relationships are linked with well-being and lower mortality (Bar-

Kalifa, Hen-Weissberg, & Rafaeli, 2015). Ferreira, Narciso, Novo, and Pereira (2014)

further stated, "Couple satisfaction is currently viewed as a public health issue due to its

recognized associations with positive outcomes regarding both physical and mental

health, and with relationship outcomes such as stability and child adjustment" (p. 390).

Mirecki, Brimhall, and Bramesfeld (2013) reported that more people will soon be

in subsequent marriages than first marriages and they expect a better new marriage than

their last. The findings on whether subsequent marriages are better than previous

marriages are mixed, however. For example, McCarthy and Ginsberg (2007) found

relationship pride and marital satisfaction are higher in second marriages, while some

studies reported no difference or higher satisfaction in first marriages (Mirecki et al.,

2013; Ragsdale, Brandau-Brown, & Bello, 2010). Mirecki et al. found no difference in mutual constructive communication between first and second marriages and only marginally-higher levels of reported demand-withdraw in first marriages. However, divorce rates are about 10% higher for subsequent marriages, which also tend to end more quickly (Falke & Larson, 2007; McCarthy & Ginsberg, 2007).

The Effect of Children on Marital Instability

How children factor into marital quality remains understudied and under debate. Myriad studies link parenthood to decreased marital quality, which contributes to marital instability (Belsky, Spanier, & Rovine, 1983; Cowan & Cowan, 1988; Yeh, Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger, & Elder, 2006; Lehrer, 2006; Gudmunson, Beutler, Israelsen, McCoy, & Hill, 2007), though these results may be tempered by Huston and Holmes' (2004) conclusion that children have less effect on marital satisfaction than does relationship length.

Aside from debates about children's presence in the relationship, research has focused mostly on the effects of having children and little on the processes that result in these effects (Belsky, 1990) and how differences exist for stepfamilies (Beaudry, Parent, Saint-Jacques, Guay, & Boisvert, 2001). The present study explored dyadic data from 879 remarried couples and used a multiple group approach to consider whether the wife, the husband, neither, or both have children, and how the use of socioemotional behaviors like negativity, positivity, and sexual interest, relate to marital instability (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991). We will examine associations for partners' own levels of negativity, positivity, and sexual interest, as well as the other partner's levels of these socioemotional behaviors for both husbands and wives.

Negativity

Huston and Vangelisti (1991) suggested negative behaviors were more predictive of daily marital satisfaction than positive behaviors. Gill, Christensen, and Fincham (1999) asserted that husbands' and wives' negativity predicted satisfaction declines, especially when issues were met with blame, pressure, and negative judgments. Further, negativity is said to result in marital instability (Guilbert, Vace, & Pasley, 2000; Gudmunson et al., 2007). In Gottman's (1994) study of married couples, four negative interaction constructs emerged that were dubbed *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. These negative interactions were reported to produce negativity and marital instability (Gottman, 1994; Guilbert, Vace, & Pasley, 2000). Persistent consideration of separation and divorce, poor communication, and external stress have also been established as reliable predictors of divorce (Booth & White, 1980). Previous studies that investigate how partners in different constellations of stepfamilies may experience negativity were not found.

Gottman, Swanson, and Swanson (2002) reported that negative affect is correlated with marital satisfaction and longevity predictions in a study of married couples. However, they also identified potential benefits of negativity in relationships (e.g., identifying conflict causing behaviors) and cautioned therapists to avoid making war on negative affect. They claimed a limited range in affect inhibits intimacy central to closer relationships. Finally, they indicated that relationship healing after conflicts can reduce emotional distance and marital instability (Yeh et al., 2006).

Gender differences exist in the response to negative affect in close relationships. Gottman and Levenson (1988) suggested that men were more likely than women to

emotionally withdraw in conflict, creating a climate of imbalance and negativity. Men's

higher reactivity to stress may result from sex differences including endocrine responses

and the adrenergic components of the cardiovascular system (i.e., adrenaline and

noradrenaline). Thus, negative affect may be more physiologically punishing and

aversive for men, who are more likely to experience affect flooding (Gottman, 1994). It is

for these reasons Levenson, Carstensen, and Gottman (1994) suggested men may look

more to bodily cues to signal emotions, where women tend to look to the social

environment. Further, Mirecki et al. (2013) suggested men resort to self-defensive and

protective behaviors when faced with anxiety more than women, while Huston and

Vangelisti (1991) said wives are more likely to use negativity toward their spouses;

possibly due to higher relationship commitment. They claim this may be related to the

tendency for husbands to suppress negative conflict behaviors (Gill et al., 1999; Gottman

& Krokoff, 1989; Mirecki et al., 2013). Other findings suggest distressed wives were less

likely than distressed husbands to de-escalate conflict using positivity to respond to

negative interactions (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Notarius, Benson, Sloane, & Vanzetti,

1989). In this study, negativity was expected to be related with marital instability for

both husbands and wives, although the patterns of association were expected to depend

on the presence or absence of children for each spouse as noted previously.

Positivity

In contrast to findings about negativity, other research suggests it is not the

presence of negative affect that predicts marital instability, but the absence of relationship

positivity (Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Schramm & Adler-Baeder, 2012; Gudmunson et

al., 2007). Huston and Vangelisti (1991) defined positivity as the extent to which one

behaves in a manner intended to produce pleasurable feelings for oneself and one's

partner. Gottman et al. (2002) said married couples with low positivity tend to experience

increased flooding, diffuse physiological arousal, and they arrange parallel lives that limit

interaction, which ultimately makes them more vulnerable to loneliness or seeking other

relationships. Gottman and Levenson (2000) reported that 80% of all men and women

cited growing apart, losing the feeling of closeness, and not feeling loved or appreciated

by the partner as the major reasons for seeking divorce, rather than anger, arguments, or

negative affect (as was reported by 44% of women and 35% of men). They said positive

affect was the only variable that discriminated between happy and unhappy couples and

predicted marital stability in their study. This contrasts with findings related to earlier-

divorcing couples, who have been found to show higher rates of *the Four Horsemen*,

which may suggest people learn to engage in these behaviors less as the relationship

progresses. Changing the affective communication in mundane conversations may

establish an emotional connection that could positively influence the way the couple

approaches conflict (i.e., start-up). Further, emotional investment has been positively

linked with commitment (Carpenter, Nathanson, & Kim, 2007) and emotional well-being

is linked with marital stability (Yeh et al., 2006; Gudmunson et al., 2007).

Madhyastha, Hamaker, and Gottman (2011) claimed continued mutual negativity

is common in unhappy couples, where happily married couples approach conflict with a

"climate of agreement" (p. 292). Their study of married couples sought to explore how

one spouse influences another, both in the interaction and in a consistent (i.e., positive or

negative) fashion. This suggests emotional malleability during conflict may depend on a

sense of "we-ness" and adaptive responses (i.e., positivity) during times of peace

(Ledermann, Bodenmann, Rudaz, & Bradbury, 2010; McNulty, Wenner, & Fisher, 2015). Improved awareness is also important as misunderstandings obfuscate the meanings of nonverbal communication. For example, Huston and Vangelisti (1991) found men more likely to interpret the absence of affection and positivity as hostile, while more women interpret the absence of hostility as love. Madhyastha et al. (2011) suggested couples should increase positivity during conflict and work to lower the amount each partner allows their own emotions to affect the partner. An answer that remains elusive due to inconsistent research is whether negative affect has more ability to harm stability in the relationship than positivity does in creating it (Gottman et al., 2002; Madhyastha et al., 2011; Matthews, Wickrama, & Conger, 1996).

In fact, positive interaction engagement differences have been found for distressed and nondistressed couples. During laboratory observation, Gottman, Coan, Carrère, and Swanson (1998) reported that nondistressed couples engaged in significantly more positive interactions, 1.93 per minute, contrasted with 1.49 per minute in distressed couples. They also reported that nondistressed partners reported significantly more pleasing events in the home environment than distressed couples. These data further support Gottman's (1994) findings that stable couples engaged in five positive interactions to every negative interaction during conflict resolution, where unstable couples' ratio was .8 to 1. Gill et al. (1999) said social learning theory implies that each partner's positivity predicts marital satisfaction improvement for both spouses. Positivity was expected to be negatively correlated with marital instability in this study.

Sexual Interest

The literature has historically shown intimacy and sexual desire have positive associations with relationship satisfaction and marital stability. The amount of sexual satisfaction in marriage has been argued to be a barometer of the couple's marital satisfaction (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; McNulty et al., 2015), a predictor of stability in intimate relationships (Carpenter et al., 2007), and vital to well-being (Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009). Methodologically disparate studies report a decrease in sexual satisfaction as one ages (Booth, Johnson, & Edwards, 1983; Carpenter et al., 2007; Edwards & Booth, 1994; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997). Previous studies suggest women have rated intimacy higher than men (Heller & Wood, 1998), contrasted with findings that women rated sexual satisfaction lower than men (correlated with decreased orgasm frequency and unmet sexual fulfillment expectations) (Liu, 2003; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). Decreased sexual desire has been linked to numerous psychological, physical, sexual, and relational challenges in addition to life-stage factors (Ferreira et al., 2014; Sims & Meana, 2010). The links between sexual satisfaction and marital stability for parents is an understudied topic, though findings suggest sexual difficulties and decreased sexual and marital stability are common for parents (Khajehei, 2015; Negash, Nalbone, Wetchler, Woods, & Fontaine, 2015). No studies that explored sexual interest for those in remarriages or stepfamilies were found. In this study, it was expected that sexual interest will be inversely related to marital instability.

The Present Study

The current study used a dyadic approach and investigated the associations between socioemotional behaviors (i.e., positivity, negativity, sexual interest) and marital

instability in a large, state-wide sample of remarital dyads. It was hypothesized that positivity and sexual interest would be inversely related with marital instability, while negativity would be positively correlated with marital instability. We also assessed partner effects between dyad members (interpersonal effects) as well as within the members of the dyad (intrapersonal effects), and we explored whether the presence of children brought to the marriage by either the husband or wife moderated associations between socioemotional behaviors and marital instability. The following research questions were tested using a multi-member multi-group Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (MMMG APIM) framework (Ledermann, Rudaz, & Grob, 2017), which permits exploration of socioemotional behaviors and marital instability in remarriages.

RQ1: What are the associations among husband and wife relationship maintenance behaviors and marital instability in remarriages?

RQ2: Do the relationships between husband and wife relationship maintenance behaviors and martial instability differ across stepfamily constellation types?

Method

Participants

The sample for the current study was recruited through the Office of Vital Statistics in the State of Utah. The sample included couples who married in the State of Utah in 2006 and reported that the marriage was a remarriage for at least one member of the couple. Of the surveys received, 34% were from rural couples. Ages ranged from 18 to 89 ($M = 42.90$, $SD = 15.13$) for the men and 17 to 89 years ($M = 39.53$, $SD = 14.30$) for the women in the study. Couples were married an average of 10.77 months at the time of the initial surveys ($SD = 15.67$). Fifty-one percent of men and 54% of women indicated the current marriage was their second, while 21% of men and 17% of women

indicated the current marriage was their first. Third marriages made up 20% and fourth

marriages represented 5% of the sample for both men and women. The remainder of the

sample were married for at least the fifth time. These numbers are consistent with

national averages (Teachman, 2008). The number of previous marriages ranged from

zero to five for men and zero to eight for women. Approximately 60% of the sample

reported an annual household income of more than $50,0000, and 15% indicated a

household annual income of more than $100,000. The size of the families ranged from

two people to eleven, with approximately 49% of the sample having two people. Three-

person homes made up approximately 16% of the sample, 17% had four, and 17.6%

indicated a family size of five or more.

Procedures

The original survey study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review

Board (IRB) at the authors' institution. The current study was reviewed by the IRB as an

exempt study using de-identified extant data. A survey packet was sent in April of 2007

to each of the identified remarried couples and included questionnaires for both the

husband and the wife. A total of 4,886 packets were originally sent. The current best

practices in mailing surveys were observed and included the mailing of a pre-notice

letter, a thank you letter, and reminder postcards. The couples were instructed to

complete the surveys separately. Responses were received from 939 men and 1,101

women, reflecting return rates of 19.2% and 22.5%, respectively. There were 879 couples

from which data was received from both members of the relationship. Almost 97% of the

sample was White, though the state's marriage licenses did not differentiate participants

with Latina/o origin. One percent of the sample was Black and approximately 1% was

Native American. Number of years of education ranged from 2 to 17 years for men

(*M*=13.63; *SD*=2.17) and 0 to 17 years for women (*M*=13.63; *SD*=2.13). Couples

cohabitated between 0 and 216 months (*M*=10.71; *SD*=22.00). The number of children in

the home ranged from 0 to 9 (*M*=1.07; *SD*=1.39). The religious makeup of the sample

was approximately 70% Latter-Day Saints, 4% Catholic, 3% Baptist, 1% Methodist, 1%

Episcopalian, and 7% Other. Approximately 14% of the sample claimed no religious

affiliation.

Measures

Marital Instability. The Marital Instability Index (MII-SF; Booth et al., 1983)

was utilized to measure marital commitment. This measure is comprised of five items

(e.g., "Have you or your spouse ever seriously suggested the idea of divorce?") that can

be answered by one of three possible answers, being "Never (i.e., 1)," "Yes, but not

recently (i.e., 2)," and "Yes, recently (i.e., 3)." Scores for these five items are summed,

with higher scores indicating greater instability. This instrument has been found to

discriminate high and low risk for divorce for couples. Alpha coefficients were .80 for

wives and .84 for husbands.

Socio-Emotional Behaviors. The Socio-Emotional Behavior Index (Huston &

Vangelisti, 1991) was used to measure relationship maintenance behaviors. This measure

is comprised of 30 items; 15 items about the participant's frequency of relationship

behaviors and 15 items about the spouse's frequency of relationship behaviors. Sample

questions ask the participant to rate the frequency with which they "Do something nice

for your spouse?" and "Fail to do something your spouse asked?" The questions are

scored using a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from "Never (i.e., 1)" to "Always (i.e., 5)."

The three subscales of the SEBI are Affectional Expression (Positivity), Sexual Interest, and Negativity. In this study, reliability coefficients for positivity were .83 for husbands and .82 for wives. Reliability coefficients for negativity were .73 for husbands and .67 for wives. The reliability coefficients for sexual interest were low at .191 for husbands and .432 for wives. Therefore, for our measure of sexual interest, we used one item from the measure that assessed the frequency of initiation of sexual intimacy.

Statistical Analyses

We used the Multi-member Multi-group Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Ledermann et al., 2017) and Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2012) to assess the associations between socioemotional behaviors and marital stability, as moderated by stepfamily constellation. Figure 1 shows the APIM. The four groups were marriages in which neither had children (i.e., 0), both had children (i.e., 1), the husband had children (i.e., 2), and the wife had children (i.e., 3).

<div align="center">

Results

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Preliminary Analyses

Means and standard deviations (*SD)* of the study variables are displayed in Table 1. Paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted to test whether husbands and wives differed in their means. Wives reported higher average levels of marital instability, $t(863) = -2.084$, $p = .037$, and positivity, $t(814) = -4.277$, $p < .001$.

Pearson correlations among the variables are shown in Table 2. The absolute values of correlations ranged from .019 to .618. The strongest association existed among husbands' and wives' ratings of marital instability, followed by the association between one's own sexual interest and own positivity ratings for both husbands and wives. The

ratings of marital instability were positively correlated with one's own and their partners' ratings of negativity and inversely correlated with their own and their partners' ratings of positivity and sexual interest. No significant correlations were found between husbands' sexual interest and wives' ratings of marital instability or between husbands' sexual interest and either husbands' or wives' ratings of negativity.

Primary Analyses

  Negativity. For couples in which both the husband and wife had children, results revealed significant actor effects for both husbands and wives, such that higher negativity related to higher marital instability. There were also significant partner effects for both husbands and wives. Comparisons indicate the effect of the husband's own negativity was significantly stronger than the partner effects from his wife. That is, husbands' and wives' marital instability were associated with both their own and their partners' negativity, with a stronger actor effect for husbands (see Table 3).

  For couples in which only the husband had children, the actor effect was significant for wives, but not for husbands. Additionally, only the partner effect from the wives to the husbands was significant. No significant differences were found among the actor effects and the partner effects. That is, the wife's negativity was related with her own and her husband's marital instability.

  For couples in which only the wife had children, there were significant actor effects for both husbands and wives. Further, a significant partner effect emerged from husbands to the wives, but not from wives to husbands. No significant differences were found among actor and partner effects. These findings mirror the pattern found for

couples in which only the husband had children and suggest that the marital instability of the partner with children was associated with the other partner's negativity.

For couples in which there were no children from previous relationships, there were significant actor effects for both husbands and wives. Additionally, there were also significant partner effects for both husbands and wives. All effects for both husbands and wives were approximately equal in magnitude with no significant differences. That is, both the husbands' and the wives' marital instability were associated with both their own and their partner's negativity, which is similar to the findings in couples in which both had children.

Positivity. For couples in which both the husband and wife had children, results revealed negative and significant actor effects for both husbands and wives, meaning the higher the positivity the lower the participant's own marital instability. Additionally, there were also significant negative partner effects for both husbands and wives that were approximately equal in magnitude to their respective actor effects. No significant differences existed when comparing the two actor effects and the two partner effects. That is, for both husband and wife, one's own marital instability was inversely associated with both one's own and the partner's positivity (see Table 4).

For couples in which only the husband had children, results revealed negative and significant actor effects for both husbands and wives, while no significant partner effects emerged. Again, no significant differences were found among actor effect and partner effects. That is, one's own marital instability was associated with one's own positivity but not with the partner's positivity.

For couples in which only the wife had children, there were no significant actor effects for husbands or wives, but a significant partner effect emerged from the husband to the wife. The partner effect from the husband to the wife was also significantly stronger than her actor effect. That is, wives' marital instability was related with their partners' positivity, but not with their own positivity.

For couples in which neither had children from previous relationships, there was a negative and significant actor effect for husbands, but not for wives. Additionally, there were also significant partner effects for both husbands and wives. The partner effect from husband to wife was significantly more negative than was wives' actor effect. That is, husbands' marital instability was inversely associated with his own and his partner's positivity, while the wives' marital instability was inversely associated with their husbands' positivity but not with their own positivity.

Sexual Interest. For couples in which both the husband and wife had children, results revealed significant negative actor effects for wives, but not for husbands; meaning the higher the sexual interest the lower the instability. Additionally, only the partner effect from the wives to the husbands was significant. No significant differences existed when comparing the two actor effects and the two partner effects (see Table 5). That is, the wives' marital instability was inversely associated with their own sexual interest and the husbands' marital instability was inversely associated with their partners' sexual interest.

For couples in which only the husband had children, a significant negative actor effect was observed for husbands, but not for wives. There were no significant partner effects. No significant differences were found among actor and partner effects. That is,

the husband's marital instability was inversely associated with his own sexual interest and no other significant actor or partner effects emerged.

For couples in which only the wife had children, results revealed significant negative actor effects for wives, but not husbands. No significant partner effects emerged. No significant differences were found among actor and partner effects. That is, similar to couples where only the husband had children, marital instability of the partner who had children was inversely associated with their own sexual interest and no other significant effects emerged.

For couples in which neither had children from previous relationships, there were no significant actor effects for husbands or wives. Additionally, there were no significant partner effects for husbands or wives. No significant differences were found among actor and partner effects. That is, marital instability was not associated with one's own or one's partner's sexual interest.

Discussion

With increasing numbers of stepfamilies and the benefits of healthy relationship functioning for adults and children, this study adds to the literature by exploring the understudied experiences of remarried couples and how these experiences differ depending on stepfamily constellation. This study used a multigroup approach to explore how relationship maintenance behaviors that included positivity, negativity, and sexual interest were related to marital instability based on different stepfamily constellations.

In this study, we used dyadic relationship information to explore how each constellation experiences the socioemotional behaviors of negativity, positivity, and sexual interest. Of the 879 couples in which data was received from both members of the

couple, 358 couples reported they both had children from previous relationships, 234 did

not have previous children, 138 indicated only the husband had children, and 138

reported only the wife had previous children.

Socioemotional Behaviors

      Negativity. Negativity has been linked with declines in day-to-day marital

satisfaction (Gill et al., 1999; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991) and is highly predictive of

early divorce (Gottman, 1994) and marital instability (Yeh et al., 2006; Guilbert, Vace, &

Pasley, 2000; Matthews, Wickrama, & Conger, 1996). Unfortunately, nearly all the

research is on married couples, with little-to-no attention paid to those in remarriages and

stepfamilies. In this study, findings suggest that one's own and one's partner's negativity

is related to increased marital instability for both husbands and wives in couples where

both had children and in couples with no previous children. A unique finding in this study

was that for couples where only the husband or the wife had previous children, there were

partner effects for negativity observed only from the partner who did not bring children to

the marriage. Thus, the parent of the children appears to observe, and be sensitive to,

their partner's negativity to gauge their perception of marital stability. Marital negativity

may spark an instinct to leave to protect the child(ren). Another novel finding was that no

actor effect for negativity was present for husbands in couples where only the husband

had children, while both actor effects were significant for couples where only the wife

had children, which could mean husbands are more focused on their partner's negativity

to gauge the family climate when they had children prior to the remarriage. Gender

differences have been found for responses to negative affect, where men are more likely

to withdraw (Gottman et al., 1998) [1]and resort to self-defensive and protective behaviors

(Mirecki et al., 2013), where women have been found to engage in more negative

behaviors toward their spouses (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991).

      Positivity. Gottman et al. (1998) caution therapists to be mindful of the need for

humor, interest, and affection to be organic, especially during conflict resolution.

Therefore, engagement and helpful affective responsiveness during times of neutral affect

can forecast both lower levels of negative start-up by the wife and more willingness for

the husband to accept influence from his wife. Gottman and Krokoff (1989) also

suggested wives should be less concerned with being positive and compliant and more

focused on helping their husbands openly confront disagreements and anger.

      Other studies indicate that the absence of positivity leads to later divorce

(Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Schramm & Adler-Baeder, 2012) and marital instability

(Matthews, Wickrama, & Conger, 1996). Low levels of positivity have been linked with

increased flooding, diffuse physiological arousal, and limiting interaction via living

parallel lives (Gottman et al., 2002). Madhyastha et al. (2011) suggested that happily

married couples approach conflict with a "climate of agreement" that may be developed

through adaptive responses and positivity during times of peace (Gottman et al., 2015;

Ledermann et al., 2010; McNulty et al., 2015; Gudmunson et al., 2007). With regard to

gender differences, women have been found less likely to use positivity to de-escalate

conflict (Notarius et al., 1989). The findings in this study suggest that marital instability

for husbands was inversely related to their own and their wife's positivity for couples

where both had children and where neither had children. The husband's own positivity

was inversely related to marital instability in couples where only husbands brought

children into the relationship and unrelated when only the wives had children. Thus,

husbands appeared to focus on their own positivity to manage stepfamily problems with their own children. Marital instability for wives was inversely related to their own positivity only when both had children or when only their husband had children, possibly suggesting wives may focus on positivity to cope with the stresses of being a stepmother in these couples. Partner effects for wives emerged in stepfamilies where both had children, when neither had children, and in couples where only the wife had children. The partner effects from the husbands in these families may suggest that positivity from the husband helps wives feel more stable when they brought children into the new stepfamily, and when the couple does not have children.

Sexual interest. Intimacy and sexual desire have been linked to higher satisfaction in the relationship (Carpenter et al., 2007; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; McNulty et al., 2015; Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009) and lower marital instability (Yeh et al., 2006; Lehrer , 2006). Inconsistent findings have not elucidated gender differences (Heller & Wood, 1998; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Liu, 2003). Further, the links between sexual and marital stability are understudied for parents and seemingly unstudied for stepfamilies (Khajehei, 2015; Negash et al., 2015). Results of this study indicate that marital instability for the partner who alone brought children into the relationship was inversely associated with their own sexual interest. This may suggest that sexual interest is important to the parents of the children and couples that can still enjoy physical intimacy in the face of parental demands may stay invested in their marriages. For couples where both had children, marital instability was inversely associated to the wife's own sexual interest and the wife's partner effect on the husband, possibly due to other familial demands superseding sexual interest. This could be related

to sexual scripts in our society that suggest that men push for and always want sex and women are the gatekeepers of sex, who are socialized to consider sex a duty or responsibility instead of a joy or pleasure. If women were able to embrace their sexuality and initiate sex (which is really what this variable measures), it may indicate a more intimate and passionate (or perhaps a more egalitarian) relationship. Sexual interest was not associated with marital instability for couples with no children. If parenting (especially if you have brought a child of your own in to the marriage) restricts availability and interest in sex (especially for women), then those who do not have that responsibility may just take the sexual interest for granted and not use it so much as a barometer for the marriage.

Therapeutic Implications

In order to assist couples in increasing positivity and decreasing negativity, therapists could use several existing strategies to address couple interaction. Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) focuses on attachment theory, which emphasizes underlying insecurities as the source of marital hostility (Bean, 2015; Bowlby, 1976). EFT seeks to reframe marital hostility into "vulnerable" or "soft" emotions for which the partner may find more empathy, like fear or sadness in lieu of contempt and anger. Gottman et al. (2015) inferred attempts at relationship repair that include humor, affection, self-disclosure, agreement, and empathy are most likely to result in increased emotional closeness and improved marital stability.

A model of marital therapy that is most likely to be effective should be based on several factors that include softened start-up by the wife, increased mutual gentleness, a problem-centered focus, and a husband's willingness to both accept influence from his

wife and to de-escalate her low-intensity negative affect. This will require abandoning the

active listening model in favor of a focus on a healthy ratio of positivity to negativity (at

least five to one) in the relationship and using positive affect to de-escalate marital

conflict and to physiologically soothe the husband (Gill et al., 1999; Gottman, 1994;

Gottman et al., 1998; Matthews, Wickrama, & Conger, 1996). Therapists are also

cautioned to avoid making war on negative affect, as negative affect can draw attention to

conflict-causing behaviors and help reduce emotional distance through relationship

healing after a conflict (Gottman et al., 2002).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is limited by a number of factors. The sample for this study was drawn

from a highly religious state with relatively limited diversity. While invitations were sent

to every couple in the state that indicated the marriage was a remarriage, selection bias

may be present based on couples that completed the surveys. Additionally, some items in

the questionnaires were altered from the validated measures (e.g., sexual interest subscale

items for the SEBI). It is also possible that answers to questions about sexuality may be

influenced by the religious majority context from which these data were collected. The

aim of the original study from which these data originate did not focus specifically on the

levels of the socioemotional behaviors and thus we did not have a measurement by which

to determine the levels or ratio of positive to negative interactions for these couples

(Gottman, 1994). Further, gathering additional data pertinent to the socioemotional

behaviors themselves may elucidate specific benefits/challenges for different types of

positivity, negativity, and sexual interest. For example, does the perception of sexual

interest from one's spouse result in different evaluations of marital stability, or are differences reserved for actual sexual contact?

While this study adds to the study of remarriage and stepfamilies in the United States, future studies should attempt to gather data from diverse populations and cultures. Further, using unaltered validated measures may improve the low alpha found for the sexual interest subscale of the SEBI. It would be beneficial for future studies to collect quantitative data about the levels of socioemotional behaviors to ascertain the ratios of positive to negative behaviors for analysis. Additionally, future studies could employ a longitudinal design to explore how the levels of socioemotional behaviors influence relationships over time. These data could also guide treatment for couples based upon the stages or length of their marriages in the event these findings change over time.

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Table 1

Group	Variable	N	M	SD
	Husband			
	MII	355	6.01	1.89
	Positivity	334	3.85	0.70
	Negativity	356	1.73	0.52
Both had	Sex. Interest	347	3.05	1.20
Children	**Wife**			
(n = 358)	MII	353	6.14	2.02
	Positivity	356	3.98	0.65
	Negativity	358	1.73	0.43
	Sexual Interest	356	2.86	1.19
	Husband			
	MII	138	5.71	1.50
	Positivity	124	3.90	0.66
	Negativity	137	1.71	0.38
Only Husband	Sex. Interest	135	3.05	1.19
had Children	**Wife**			
(n = 138)	MII	138	5.82	1.62
	Positivity	135	3.95	0.62
	Negativity	136	1.76	0.43
	Sexual Interest	137	2.73	1.12
	Husband			
	MII	134	6.07	1.77
	Positivity	129	3.77	0.74
	Negativity	138	1.77	0.46
Only Wife	Sex. Interest	137	2.79	1.16
had Children	**Wife**			
(n = 138)	MII	135	6.13	1.95
	Positivity	137	3.82	0.65
	Negativity	138	1.77	0.38
	Sexual Interest	137	2.58	1.12
	Husband			
	MII	233	6.27	2.19
	Positivity	222	3.74	0.85
	Negativity	233	1.65	0.32
Neither had	Sex. Interest	225	3.07	1.53
Children	**Wife**			
(n = 234)	MII	231	6.18	1.55
	Positivity	229	3.81	0.72
	Negativity	231	1.95	0.54
	Sexual Interest	228	2.75	1.13

Note. MII = Marital Instability Index. Positivity, Negativity, and Sexual Interest are the subscale scores for the Socioemotional Behavior Index.

Table 2

Pearson correlations among study variables for husbands and wives

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. MII - H	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Pos. - H	-.269*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3. Sex. Int. – H	-.111*	.429*	-	-	-	-	-	-
4. Neg. – H	.351*	-.269*	-.036	-	-	-	-	-
5. MII – W	.618*	-.237*	-.061	.337*	-	-	-	-
6. Pos. – W	-.256*	.414*	.199*	-.264*	-.302*	-	-	-
7. Sex. Int. –W	-.134*	.216*	.230*	-.158*	-.135*	.486*	-	-
8. Neg. - W	.262*	-.169*	-.019	.415*	.317*	-.239*	-.132*	-

Note. H = husbands; W = wives; MII = Marital Instability Index; Pos. = positivity; Sex. Int. = sexual interest; Neg. = negativity; * = $p < .001$, two-tailed.

Table 3

Results of the APIM for SEBI Negativity on marital instability. Actor and partner effect comparisons for SEBI Negativity on marital instability.

Group	Effect	Estimate	*SE*	Comparison	Chi Square (*df* = 1)	*p*
	Intercept					
	Husbands	1.730***	.027			
	Wives	1.734***	.022	Act. H=Act. W	.838	.360
Both	Act. Effect			Act. H=Part. W	5.931	.015
had Kids	Husbands	1.358***	.192			
	Wives	1.036***	.250	Act. W=Part. H	.027	.870
	Par. Effect			Part. H=Part. W	3.311	.069
	W to H	.465*	.233			
	H to W	1.099***	.205			
	Intercept					
	Husbands	1.710***	.032			
	Wives	1.760***	.036	Act. H=Act. W	.726	.394
Only	Act. Effect			Act. H=Part. W	.158	.691
Husband	Husbands	.594	.380			
had Kids	Wives	1.113**	.373	Act. W=Part. H	1.791	.181
	Par. Effect			Part. H=Part. W	1.210	.271
	W to H	.845*	.338			
	H to W	.167	.423			
	Intercept					
	Husbands	1.772***	.039			
	Wives	1.771 ***	.032	Act. H=Act. W	.041	.084
Only	Act. Effect			Act. H=Part. W	2.055	.152
Wife	Husbands	1.106***	.328			
had Kids	Wives	1.222**	.424	Act. W=Part. H	.007	.934
	Par. Effect			Part. H=Part. W	2.561	.110
	W to H	.261	.397			
	H to W	1.170***	.345			
	Intercept					
	Husbands	1.782***	.032			
	Wives	1.756***	.027	Act. H=Act. W	.319	.572
Neither	Act. Effect			Act. H=Part. W	.002	.964
had	Husbands	.594***	.182			
Kids	Wives	.805**	.293	Act. W=Part. H	.004	.948
	Par. Effect			Part. H=Part. W	.395	.529
	W to H	.609**	.220			
	H to W	.834***	.243			

Note. SE = standard error; *df* = degrees of freedom; W = wives; H = husbands; Act. Effect = actor effect; Par. Effect = partner effect; Act. H = husband's actor effect; Act. W = wife's actor effect; Part. H = effects from wife on husband; Part. W = effects from husband to wife. * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001 (two-tailed).

Table 4

Results of the APIM for SEBI Positivity on marital instability. Actor and partner effect comparisons for SEBI Positivity on marital instability.

Group	Effect	Estimate	*SE*	Comparison	Chi Square (*df* = 1)	*p*
	Intercept					
	Husbands	3.853***	.037			
	Wives	3.979***	.034	Act. H=Act. W	.778	.378
Both	Act. Effect			Act. H=Part. W	.384	.535
had Kids	Husbands	-.475**	.155			
	Wives	-.588***	.164	Act. W=Part. H	.162	.688
	Par. Effect			Part. H=Part. W	.042	.837
	W to H	-.641***	.159			
	H to W	-.702***	.169			
	Intercept					
	Husbands	3.893***	.059			
	Wives	3.953***	.053	Act. H=Act. W	.504	.478
Only	Act. Effect			Act. H=Part. W	1.047	.306
Husband	Husbands	-.581**	.219			
had Kids	Wives	-.552*	.230	Act. W=Part. H	.326	.568
	Par. Effect			Part. H=Part. W	1.009	.315
	W to H	-.186	.227			
	H to W	-.317	.247			
	Intercept					
	Husbands	3.765***	.064			
	Wives	3.822***	.055	Act. H=Act. W	3.923	.048
Only	Act. Effect			Act. H=Part. W	.132	.716
Wife	Husbands	-.335	.230			
had Kids	Wives	.002	.242	Act. W=Part. H	6.849	.009
	Par. Effect			Part. H=Part. W	.262	.609
	W to H	-.192	.245			
	H to W	-1.091***	.258			
	Intercept					
	Husbands	3.800***	.046			
	Wives	3.931***	.043	Act. H=Act. W	2.474	.116
Neither	Act. Effect			Act. H=Part. W	.644	.415
had	Husbands	-.341**	.130			
Kids	Wives	-.117	.179	Act. W=Part. H	4.107	.043
	Par. Effect			Part. H=Part. W	2.691	.101
	W to H	-.521***	.137			
	H to W	-.733***	.187			

Note. SE = standard error; *df* = degrees of freedom; W = wives; H = husbands; Act. Effect = actor effect; Par. Effect = partner effect; Act. H = husband's actor effect; Act. W = wife's actor effect; Part. H = effects from wife on husband; Part. W = effects from husband on wife. * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001 (two-tailed).

Table 5

Results of the APIM for SEBI Sexual Interest on marital instability. Actor and partner effect comparisons for SEBI Sexual Interest on marital instability.

Group	Effect	Estimate	*SE*	Comparison	Chi Square (*df* = 1)	*p*
	Intercept					
	Husbands	3.063***	.064			
	Wives	2.866***	.062	Act. H=Act. W	1.155	.282
Both	Act. Effect			Act. H=Part. W	1.043	.307
had Kids	Husbands	-.109	.084			
	Wives	-.253**	.091	Act. W=Part. H	1.591	.207
	Par. Effect			Part. H=Part. W	1.722	.189
	W to H	-.246**	.085			
	H to W	-.071	.090			
	Intercept					
	Husbands	3.053***	.102			
	Wives	2.727***	.095	Act. H=Act. W	.760	.383
Only	Act. Effect			Act. H=Part. W	1.559	.212
Husband	Husbands	-.265*	.106			
had Kids	Wives	-.116	.124	Act. W=Part. H	.067	.795
	Par. Effect			Part. H=Part. W	.395	.530
	W to H	-.057	.113			
	H to W	-.164	.117			
	Intercept					
	Husbands	2.786***	.099			
	Wives	2.575 ***	.096	Act. H=Act. W	1.591	.207
Only	Act. Effect			Act. H=Part. W	.100	.752
Wife	Husbands	-.068	.134			
had Kids	Wives	-.341*	.151	Act. W=Part. H	2.259	.133
	Par. Effect			Part. H=Part. W	.506	.477
	W to H	-.137	.139			
	H to W	.017	.148			
	Intercept					
	Husbands	2.956***	.074			
	Wives	2.650***	.073	Act. H=Act. W	1.248	.264
Neither	Act. Effect			Act. H=Part. W	1.667	.197
had	Husbands	.007	.082			
Kids	Wives	-.152	.107	Act. W=Part. H	1.526	.217
	Par. Effect			Part. H=Part. W	2.141	.143
	W to H	-.154	.080			
	H to W	.056	.111			

Note. SE = standard error; *df* = degrees of freedom; W = wives; H = husbands; Act. Effect = actor effect; Par. Effect = partner effect; Act. H = husband's actor effect; Act. W = wife's actor effect; Part. H = effects from wife on husband; Part. W = effects from husband on wife. * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001 (two-tailed).
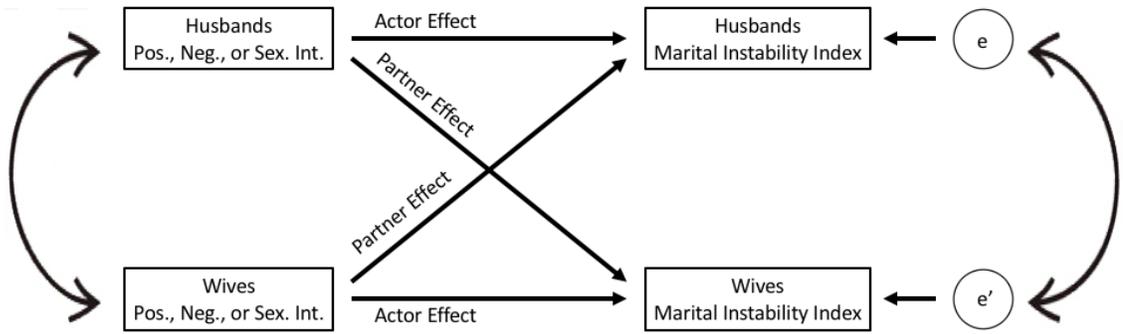
Figure 1. Actor-Partner Interdependence Model. Pos. = positivity; Sex. Int. = sexual interest; Neg. = negativity.