

A Cascade Model of Positive Family Functioning in Black Families: Neighborhoods, Constructive Conflict, and Parenting

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Introduction

Spillover theory suggests that relationship functioning within the interpartner systems ‘spills-over’ into the parent-child system (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). Though much research has focused on negative effects, recent work emphasizes the importance of examining positive and constructive dimensions of interpartner relationships (e.g., Warmuth et al., 2020).

Constructive conflict discussions and problem-solving behaviors are pivotal in maintaining lasting relationships (Schneewind & Gerhard, 2002). Positive interparental dynamics may *spill over* into parent-child relationships and promote a supportive climate at home (Kopystynska et al., 2020). This enhances parents’ ability to engage in effective parenting, such as scaffolding (Don et al., 2024).

Scaffolding functions to provide information, problem-solving strategies, and feedback within the child’s zone of proximal development (Grusec & Davidov, 2010).

Guided by ecological models of family functioning, this study examines the ways in which Black individuals’ relationship and family processes are embedded within their **neighborhood context**. Against a backdrop of deficit-focused research on Black families in mainstream literature, we focus on protective and promotive aspects.

The current study examines positive cascades of individual constructive conflict behaviors, interpartner dyad cooperation and cohesion, and promotive parenting behaviors over time. Furthermore, we test how local economic and educational opportunity may be differentially associated with mothers’ and fathers’ constructive conflict behaviors and ultimately scaffolding.

Participants

Participants are 66 parent-child triads. Data was collected over a 2-year timepoint. Couples had to live together for at least 1 year prior to participation. Median household income fell within \$17,000 - \$22,999.

Couple’s race	75.8% monoracial	24.2% interracial
Relationship Status	36.4% married	48.5% serious
Years living together	M _{year} = 3.5 years	SD = 2.4 years

Mothers	M _{age} = 30.8 years	98.5% bio parent	1.5% stepmother
Fathers	M _{age} = 34.4 years	75.8% bio parent	24.2% stepfather
Children	M _{age} = 2.9 years	54.5% female	

Methodology

W0 Local Neighborhood Opportunity was measured using census tract data taken from the Child Opportunity Index 2.0 (COI 2.0; “DiversityDataKids”, 2023), which uses indicators based off participants’ zip codes. **Economic Opportunity** (reverse-scored poverty rate, homeownership rate, employment rate, etc.) and **Education Opportunity** (3rd-grade math and reading standardized test scores, high school graduation rate, accessibility to early education centers, etc.).

W1 Individual Positive Conflict Behaviors were observed during an *Interparental Problem-Solving Task* (IPST), where couples were asked to discuss conflicts in their relationship. Codes were derived from the *System for Coding Interactions in Dyads* (SCID; Malik & Lindahl, 2004). **Problem-solving behaviors** reflect the ability to discuss feelings and opinions in a manner to find a solution. **Supportive behaviors** reflect the degree to which the partner listens, validates, and attempts to understand the other partner’s perspective. ICCs range from .64-.86.

W2 Dyadic Cohesive Conflict patterns were observed using the same IPST. Rather than assigning individual ratings, one rating was assigned to the dyad to indicate the degree to which they engaged in patterns of behaviors. **The Cooperative-Cohesive Conflict Pattern** refers to the sense of unity, closeness, and teamwork within a couple, such that they were working towards a common goal. ICC = .99.

W3 Parenting Outcome was observed using *The Grocery Store Task* (Suor et al., 2019), a grocery store board game designed to be challenging for young children to execute independently. Parents participated separately with their child. They were told they could help their child but not complete the task for them. The **Scaffolding Practices** code, adapted from Gauvain and Perez (2008)’s cognitive assistance scale, assesses the type of scaffolding assistance that parents provided their child, considering the type and frequency of behaviors. Global ratings were assessed on a 9-point scale of *no scaffolding* to *advanced scaffolding*. ICCs were .87 for mothers and .74 for fathers.

Results

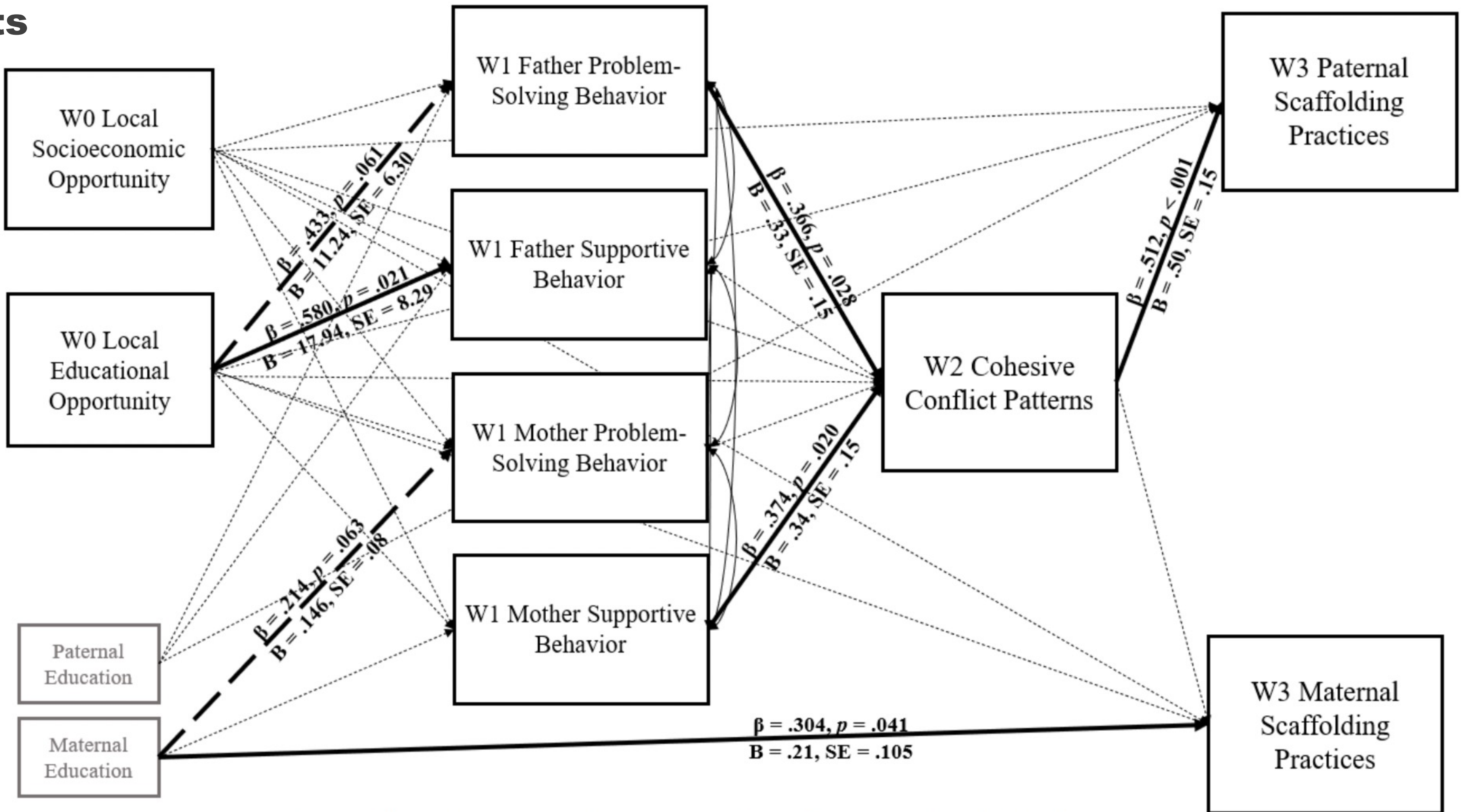


Figure 1. W0 = Wave 0, corresponds to public data in 2015, approximately 1 year prior to when Wave 1 data collection began. W1 = Wave 1, W2 = Wave 2, W3 = Wave 3.

Local Educational Opportunity was positively associated with fathers’ constructive conflict behaviors, indicated by a significant association with **supportive communication** ($\beta = .580, p = .021$) and near significant association with **problem-solving** ($\beta = .43, p = .061$).

Mothers’ supportive communication positively predicted **dyadic cooperation** during conflict ($\beta = .374, p = .020$), while **fathers’ problem-solving strategies** predicted **dyadic cooperation** ($\beta = .366, p = .028$).

Cohesive dyadic conflict patterns positively predicted fathers’ **scaffolding practices** over time ($\beta = .512, p < .001$).

Discussion

Results revealed that local neighborhood educational opportunity predicted individual problem-solving and supportive communication during conflict for fathers.

Mothers’ supportive communication and fathers’ problem-solving behaviors predicted dyadic cohesive cooperative patterns of conflict one year later. This suggests that mothers and fathers make differential contributions to healthy functioning in the interparental subsystem. Turning to determinants of scaffolding, dyadic cooperation during conflict was positively associated with fathers’ use of scaffolding behaviors.

Overall, the model indicates a positive cascade of processes that promote scaffolding behaviors in Black fathers specifically. **Local education opportunity may promote fathers’ adoption of constructive conflict behaviors which, in turn, foster patterns of cooperation in the interparental subsystem, ultimately supporting adaptive functioning in the father-child subsystem.**

In contrast, maternal positive conflict behaviors scaffolding behaviors were only significantly predicted by mothers’ levels of educational attainment, suggesting individual-level factors may shape mothers’ behaviors.

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