Special Supplement: Qualitative Research in Psychology

Marital and Parental Conflicts in Families with Children: Characteristics and Resolution Strategies[1]

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Abstract: Conflicts are considered inevitable in relationships and, therefore, more than their occurrence, what matters are the strategies used for resolving them. The aim of the study was to investigate the characteristics of, and the strategies used for resolving, marital and parental conflicts in families with children. It is an empirical study, with qualitative design, in which 12 couples participated in a semi-structured interview. Thematic categorical analysis has shown that marital conflicts involved personal, relational and contextual reasons and the use of constructive and destructive resolution strategies. Constructive strategies included an emphasis on open communication and problem solving; destructive, emphasis on avoidance and verbal hostility. Parent-child conflicts involved reasons related to the parental difficulty in imposing limits, with the use of constructive strategies, characterized by non-violent discipline, and destructive, by physical and psychological aggression. The findings of this study may contribute to interventions of professionals who work with families, in different contexts.

Keywords: conflict, marital conflict, parent-child relations, family relations, conflict resolution

Conflitos Conjugais e Parentais em Famílias com Crianças: Características e Estratégias de Resolução

Resumo: Conflitos são considerados inevitáveis nos relacionamentos e, portanto, mais do que a ocorrência, o que importa são as estratégias utilizadas para sua resolução. O objetivo do estudo foi compreender as características e as estratégias de resolução de conflitos conjugais e parentais em famílias com crianças. Trata-se de pesquisa empírica, de delineamento qualitativo, da qual participaram 12 casais, que responderam à entrevista semiestruturada. Análise categorial temática evidenciou que os conflitos conjugais envolveram motivos pessoais, relacionais e contextuais e a utilização de estratégias de resolução construtivas e destrutivas. As estratégias construtivas abrangeram comunicação aberta e solução de problemas; as destrutivas, evitação e hostilidade verbal. Os conflitos pais-criança abarcaram motivos relacionados à dificuldade parental para imposição de limites, com uso de estratégias construtivas, caracterizadas pela disciplina não violenta, bem como estratégias destrutivas, com agressão física e psicológica. Os achados desse estudo podem contribuir para intervenções de profissionais que atuam com famílias, em diferentes contextos.

Palavras-chave: conflito, conflito conjugal, relações pais-criança, relações familiares, resolução de conflito

Conflictos Conyugales y Parentales en Familias con Niños: Características y Estrategias de Resolución

Resumen: Los conflictos son inevitables en las relaciones y, por lo tanto, lo que importa mas allá de la ocurrencia son las estrategias utilizadas para su resolución. El objetivo fue comprender las características y las estrategias de resolución de conflictos conyugales y parentales en familias con niños. Se trata de un estudio empírico cualitativo, del cual participaron 12 parejas, que respondieron una entrevista semiestructurada. El análisis categorial temático evidenció que los conflictos conyugales abarcaron motivos personales, relacionales y contextuales y la utilización de estrategias de resolución constructivas y destructivas. Las estrategias constructivas implican comunicación abierta y solución de problemas, y las destructivas implican evitación y hostilidad verbal. Los conflictos padres-hijos abarcaron motivos relacionados a la dificultad parental para imposición de límites, con uso de estrategias constructivas, caracterizadas por la disciplina no violenta, y destructivas, con agresión física y psicológica. Los hallazgos de este estudio pueden contribuir para intervenciones de profesionales que actúan con familias en diferentes contextos.

Palabras clave: conflicto, conflicto marital, relaciones padres-niños, relaciones familiares, resolución de conflicto

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Conflicts are considered inevitable in relationships (Bolze, Crepaldi, Schmidt, & Vieira, 2013). It follows that – more than their occurrence – what matters are the strategies used for resolving them. Marital conflicts influence the entire family system, in particular the relationships between the marital (couple) and parental (parents-child) subsystems (Rinaldi & Howe, 2003). From the point of view of the repercussions that marital conflicts cause to the members, the conflicts can be classified as constructive or destructive (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Goeke-Morey, Cummings, Harold, & Shelton, 2003).

Constructive marital conflicts involve behaviors which include their resolution through successful, progressive strategies for resolving the situation (for example, changing subject instead of continuing the fight), mutual respect and positive perceptions of unresolved conflicts (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2016). When the conflicts occur in the presence of the child, explanations on the part of the parents regarding how the conflicts were resolved – and even parental clarification that conflicts are not a serious threat, or that they can be managed – are considered constructive strategies, as they help the child to develop positive behaviors in conflict situations in her/his own relationships (Bergman, Cummings, & Warmuth, 2016).

In contrast, conflicts identified as destructive include strategies involving verbal aggression or physical violence between the members of the couple, nonverbal hostility or "the silent treatment" (stonewalling). Destructive conflicts, furthermore, may involve abrupt withdrawal during the conflictive interaction, causing the interaction's obstruction, threats to the stability of the family (for example, threatening to separate or leave home) and arguments over topics related to the child (Coln, Jordan, & Mercer, 2013; Cummings et al., 2016).

Cummings et al. (2016) mapped the effects of the parents' marital conflict for the child, evidencing that this last may react to exposure to marital conflict in multiple ways, including emotional reactivity and behavioral changes. These authors also observed the child's mediation or intervention in the conflictive interaction, besides withdrawal from the scene of conflict with the aim of avoiding it. They emphasized expressions or postures of distress, sadness, anger, fear and worry – indicating that the parents' marital conflict is shown to be a significant stressor for the child.

In addition to this, marital conflict in the presence of children can affect them directly – through the exposure *per se*, and because it serves as a problem resolution model – as well as indirectly, through compromising the parent-child relationship and through causing changes in the parental practices (in the emotional responsiveness and in the imposition of discipline) (Coln et al., 2013). In this sense, the marital conflict is related to negative parental practices, and is associated with the concept of spillover effect (Erel & Burman, 1995), which supports the hypothesis that there is a spilling over of the quality of the marital relationship to the parent-child relationship (Hameister, Barbosa, & Wagner, 2015). As a result, the stress and hostility which emerge from the marital conflict are transposed to the parental relationship, leading to changes in the emotional availability of the parents (rejection, hostility, nonresponsiveness) or in the control which these exercise over the child (poor supervision, or severe or inconsistent discipline) (Cummings et al., 2016; McCoy, George, Cummings, & Davies, 2013).

The use of strategies of hostility and of violence in the conflictive marital interactions, furthermore, is associated with severe disciplinary strategies with the child, which may include psychological aggression and corporal punishment, whose use may trigger emotional and behavioral disorders in the child (Liu & Wang, 2015b). The use of destructive strategies for conflict resolution by the couple is related to negative parental practices and to compromising of typical child development (Coln et al., 2013; Hameister et al., 2015).

Differing from the conflictive interactions between spouses, when parents and children become involved in situations of conflict, due to substantial power differences, the parents' wishes tend to prevail (Recchia, Ross, & Vickar, 2010). In order to control the child's behavior and obtain obedience, the parents use either constructive strategies for conflict resolution (with the rational use of discussion, argument and reasoning) or destructive ones (involving the use of verbal and nonverbal threatening acts or physical force) (Rinaldi & Howe, 2003). Studies with Brazilian samples have evidenced the predominance of constructive strategies, including mainly nonviolent discipline, which involves providing explanations to the child about what is right and what is wrong, as well as depriving them of things or withdrawing privileges (Peruhype, Halboth, & Alves, 2011; Runyan et al., 2010). Nevertheless, destructive strategies, which include psychological aggression and physical punishments also seem to be common in childrearing, both in Brazil and in other countries (Carmo & Alvarenga, 2012; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Moura, Moraes, & Reichenheim, 2008; Runyan et al., 2010). These strategies are considered destructive because they teach the child that problems can be resolved through violence, compromising the child's social functioning and relationships with siblings and peers (Simons & Wurtele, 2010).

Thus, the need is evidenced to extend the understanding of the phenomena which involve marital and parental conflict resolution strategies. Regarding the couple's relationship, one recent systematic review of the literature, using the descriptors *conflito conjugal* (marital conflict), *casamento* (marriage) and *resolução de problemas* (problem resolution), indicated the paucity of studies on this topic in the Brazilian context (Costa, Cenci, & Mosmann, 2016). Moreover, studies referring to the repercussions of the marital conflict for the children's adjustment remain scarce in Brazil (Goulart, Wagner, Barbosa, & Mosmann, 2015). Emphasis is placed, furthermore, on the importance of research adopting the family as the minimum unit for analysis, broadening the focus beyond the individual (Böing, Crepaldi, & Moré, 2008). Studies of this nature contribute to the understanding of the complex dynamic which permeates family relationships.

As a result, the present study's aim was to investigate the characteristics of, and the strategies used for resolving, marital and parental conflicts in families with children. Given the complexity of the topic, empirical research was undertaken, with a qualitative design, as is indicated in studies with families, as it allows one to grasp the phenomena which surround the participants in a multidimensional way, and gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences, points of view, opinions and meanings – that is, the participants' subjective perception of reality (Böing et al., 2008).

Method

Participants

The participants were 12 couples with children, who had been married from six to 24 years. Eight of these dyads had

been married for over 10 years. The women's age varied from 23 to 46 years old, and the men's, from 26 to 48. Five children were female and seven male. Their ages varied from 5 to 7 years old. The time the women had spent in education varied from 11 to 18 years, and the men, from 8 to 18 years. Monthly family income varied from R$ 700,00 to R$ 4.000,00. The weekly workload, of both the women and men, varied from 20 to 44 hours per week. All the participants were part of a broader survey, undertaken through a partnership between one Brazilian University, and two Canadian ones.

Instruments

Sociodemographic questionnaire. Developed specifically for the research project of which this study is part, it was made up of 15 questions investigating the composition of the family and the parents' educational level, income, and weekly working hours.

Semistructured interview. This investigated the marital, parental and intergenerational relationships – as well as the conflicts and the resolution strategies. For the present study, only nine questions were used, relating to marital and parental conflicts ("We would like each one to try to remember, and tell us about, a situation of conflict which was striking, during your relationship"); the strategies used for resolving these ("How did you resolve this situation?"); and the parents' and child's reactions in situations of conflict between the couple in the child's presence ("When the conflict that you described took place, where was the child? What did you say to the child at the time of the conflict?").

Procedure

Data collection. The interview, arranged beforehand by telephone, was held in the participants' own home and was undertaken together with both members of the couple by a pair of researchers, both of whom are psychologists. The interview involved building a relationship, the signing of the Free and Informed Terms of Consent, and the answering of questions via a semistructured script. Care was taken to provide members of the marital dyad with the opportunity to respond to each question individually. The interviews' duration varied from 50 to 120 minutes. Finally, the main topics addressed were summarized, along with the embracement of the couple's feelings and perceptions about the experience of the interview.

Data analysis. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and were analyzed using thematic categorical content analysis (Bardin, 2011), and were organized using the Atlas.ti 5.0 software, considered an appropriate tool when categorization occurs via a cataloguing process (analogic and progressive classification of the elements, in which each category is only defined at the end of each operation). After successive readings of the corpus (12 interviews), the elements of analysis (themes) were defined. Their classification made it possible to construct subcategories and their respective categories, which form a basis for the phenomenon studied. This categorization was assessed by two experts in the

subject and was approved for use, with small adjustments. The percentage of agreement of each one of the two judges with the first author, based in the formula of Fagundes (1999), was, respectively, 84.6% and 92.3%. Finally, three thematic categories were constituted: Marital conflicts and resolution strategies; Parental conflicts and resolution strategies; and Parental and child reactions regarding the marital conflict in the presence of the child.

Ethical Considerations

The project of which the present study is part was approved by the Committee for Ethics in Research with Human Beings, of the Federal University of Santa Catarina (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina), under Certificate No. 520/2009. With the aim of preserving the participants' anonymity, the couples were identified by the letter C, followed by a number indicating the order in which the interviews took place (C1, C2, C3, and so on, up to C12).

Results

Marital Conflicts and Resolution Strategies

This category, described by 11 couples, addressed situations of conflict within the couple reported as significant or important – as well as strategies used for resolving marital conflicts on these occasions. It is made up of three subcategories, namely: Marital conflicts; Constructive strategies for resolving marital conflicts; and Destructive strategies for resolving marital conflicts.

Marital conflicts. These involved situations of conflict in the marital relationship reported as significant or important by members of the couple. The topics related to the reasons for conflict between the spouses encompassed varied content, concerning personal, relational and contextual aspects. Regarding the personal aspects, the couples reported the difficulty in leaving behind "singleness" and adapting to married life, as well as the depression suffered by one of the spouses and abuse of alcohol: "You want to do things that you used to do when you were single . . . and come home two days later and, sometimes, not come home at all . . . And when you arrive home, the person is there ready for combat, and starts attacking you the moment you walk in" (C11; married for 7 years); "Well, it was because I had depression. And, let's say, he [the husband] didn't have any patience" (C9; married for 24 years); "He [husband] likes to have a beer . . . And that – I think it was more in the beginning, at least, of our marriage – caused the most trouble" (C12; married for 13 years). The relational aspects were mentioned in situations of jealousy, suspicion of betrayal on the part of the spouse, arguments and/or temporary separation, as in the following account: "I suspected that he [husband] was betraying me . . . And I told him to get out of the house. I didn't discuss it in front of [child's name]. But, at that point, for me, I didn't want it anymore. I didn't think it was going to work out anymore" (C3; married for 7 years). The contextual aspects referred to conflicts caused by the tidying of the house, by distancing

caused by work, and by the financial situation: "Last year . . . I was away a lot, or at work a lot. He [husband] ended up drifting away from me . . . Being with various friends, going to bars, drinking a little. So, we ended up saying, like, 'We can't go on like this'" (C4; married 17 years); "I did a few things . . . wanting to disguise our real financial situation, employment and everything . . . it all came up at once and we [the couple] had a really serious conflict, involving separation, of leaving for a few days" (C10; married 20 years).

Constructive strategies for resolving marital conflicts. This subcategory covered the search for constructive resolution of the conflict between the couple. Its themes were characterized by conversations between the spouses, guided by open communication, assessment of alternatives and solution of problems. These strategies covered behaviors such as: conversing about the problem or situation which led to the conflict; assessing the possible alternatives with the spouse and arriving at an agreement; being flexible, that is, each one ceding a little; and overcoming: going back, saying sorry, and resolving the question in order to move on: "Whenever we have, like, some conflict, we try to put it like this: 'Okay, what do you think is wrong?' 'Okay. Let's try to improve this'" (C1; married 6 years). Some couples emphasize the importance of understanding that there are conflictive situations which take time to be overcome: "It's a question of time, too . . . These are things where you aren't going to say, from one hour to the next, 'I've forgotten about it, I've wiped it from my memory'. Because time is the only cure, you know?" (C3; married 7 years). One couple also mentioned the need to ask for mediation from another family member: "We called my father. A thing I had never done before [laughs]. What did my father say? . . . 'Sit down and talk, because you have a daughter'" (C4; married 17 years).

Destructive strategies for resolving marital conflicts. This subcategory addressed topics which dealt with strategies in which the couple opted to avoid the conflict or to use verbal hostility to resolve it. Avoidance was characterized by not speaking about the problem which triggered the conflict, whether temporarily or permanently. In this regard, some participants mentioned that they preferred to remain silent, that is, not to converse, and wait for time to help them to forget the conflictive situation: "If you have a wound, you can't touch it. If you do, it hurts. And that's what I do, I avoid touching it as much as possible" (C9; married 24 years). Others, however, chose to withdraw temporarily and left the problem for resolving later: "We turn our faces from each other, and neither says anything to the other" (C3; married 7 years); "If it's necessary to sleep in separate rooms, you sleep in separate rooms, and you leave it to another day, because at the time it's too complicated" (C12; married 13 years). Verbal hostility referred to discussions which developed into arguments, in which the members of the couple struggled in the conflictive interaction and would not give way without arguing and/or trying to convince the other that their opinion was correct: "We are, how shall I put this, a bit loud – when we begin to argue, we get carried away, and we shout" (C11; married 7 years); "I am more argumentative, I am more inflexible, I will give way, but first I will make him [the husband] suffer – before I

give way, I will let him feel that he is wrong, and then I will give way it by bit" (C10; married 20 years). One participant also mentioned that his wife tends to bring up past conflicts in conflictive situations: "Oh yeah, you [turning to his wife] always want to go back to such-and-such a situation, and this, sometimes, gets in the way of our relationship – because we carry on being stuck to things which, wow, happened four, five years ago" (C11; married 7 years).

Parental Conflicts and Resolution Strategies

This category involved the participation of 11 couples and covered the description of conflictive interactions between parents and children which were reported as significant or important by members of the couple, as well as the resolution strategies used by them with the child. It is made up of three subcategories: Parental conflicts; Constructive strategies for resolution of parental conflicts; and Destructive strategies for resolution of parental conflicts.

Parental conflicts. This subcategory involved issues related to the description of conflicts in situations of child behavior considered inappropriate by the parents. The narratives addressed the child throwing tantrums, whining, or doing something to call the parents' attention: "When she wants something, and she knows she can't have it, she insists, she insists . . . She stamps her feet" (C8; married 14 years); "For example, at bath time, when I want him [the son] to behave, he begins to play, he begins to run around . . . he goes and hides, and we have that row again" (C12; married 13 years). Another reason for conflict was the child's demand to sleep in the parents' bed: "He insists on sleeping between us . . . Well, I managed to negotiate with him that he goes to sleep in his own bed, and comes into ours in the early hours of the morning. This makes me very sad with him" (C10; married 20 years). The other situations reported included the child doing something without warning the parents and making them worried, as well as not behaving appropriately or breaking something. This even involved a situation of use of violence as an isolated fact: "When he [the son] broke my cell phone . . . Because I had never hit [son's name], but that day I smacked him. I smacked him" (C7; married 9 years).

Constructive strategies for resolving parental conflicts. This subcategory addressed conflict resolution strategies used by the parents with the child. They involved issues related to nonviolent discipline, that is, conversing with the child, giving explanations, telling off and calling attention: "I draw her attention to what she's done, and I talk to her about it" (C4; married 17 years). The members of the couple also mentioned isolating the child temporarily or taking away privileges – that is, prohibiting the child, for a specified period, from playing, using the computer, watching some TV program or doing some other things that the child likes: "I always try to explain the reason why he [the son] is being punished, the reason why I have taken that toy away" (C5; married 13 years). Another strategy mentioned was telling the child how the parents felt when she/he did something wrong, or putting the child in the mother's or father's place: "I was really sad – 'you shouldn't have done that with my

cell phone', but then I hugged him, gave him a kiss and we all went to bed" (C7; married 9 years); "I said '[daughter's name], now let's pretend that you are dad and I am you. How would you act if I did this, this and this?' And then she began to think about what she would do" (C8; married 14 years). One of the parents mentioned saying sorry to the child for how he acted when he considered that he had not shown an appropriate attitude at the time of the conflictive interaction: "Well, I said to him [the son]: 'Look, I'm sorry that I did such-and-such, but it was because of this, and this and this. And I don't want you to do what you did again, either'" (C1; married 6 years).

Destructive strategies for resolving parental conflicts. This subcategory encompasses topics related to actions of one or both parents which involved physical and/or psychological aggression to the child. Corporal punishment, such as smacking or hitting with a slipper, was reported in situations in which the parents aimed to punish or force the child to do something the parents wanted, or to stop a certain behavior which they considered to be inappropriate: "Well, I smacked him [the son] with a sandal" (C12; married 13 years). Physical punishment was also associated with strategies of nonviolent discipline, such as conversations and punishments: "That is how it has to be. They [daughters] grow up knowing this, knowing that it is wrong. This is how they are: sometimes they do things and get smacked, or are punished, or go without something" (C11; married 7 years). Psychological aggression involved situations in which – in the conflictive interaction with the child – the parents threatened or misled the child, or incited guilt or fear: "Sometimes, we have to impose – I don't know – a limit, fear, so that they [children] control their own behavior . . . They have to take care of their behavior, don't they?" (C2; married 15 years). Four couples mentioned feeling sorry after hitting the child: "I felt terrible, I gave him [the son] a few slaps . . . I felt like a coward" (C12; married 13 years). One couple, however, stated that they were not sorry, and considered corporal punishment to be necessary, in some situations: "At that precise point, he should not have done what he did. He got two smacks with a slipper on his bottom, you know? For me, it was nothing to feel sorry about having done" (C7; married 9 years).

Parents' and Children's Reactions to Marital Conflict in the Presence of the Child

This category was evidenced in the responses of 10 couples. It involved the identification by the members of the marital dyad of conflictive interaction in the presence of the child, and the reactions of those involved in these situations. It is made up of two subcategories: Parent's reactions to marital conflict in the presence of the child; and Children's reactions to marital conflict in their presence.

Parent's reactions to marital conflict in the presence of the child. This subcategory covered topics which referred to behaviors of the members of the couple, in relation to the child, during and after the child witnessing conflictive interaction between them. The couples mentioned that, during the situation of conflict, they asked the child to leave the room, explained that they were not arguing, but rather conversing, or stopped the conflictive interaction because of the child's intervention: "We ask him [the son] to leave the room", said one spouse, to which the other added: "To go to his room. And close the door" (C1; married 6 years); "And he [the son] says straight back: 'Arguing with mom?' 'No! We are talking, [son's name]. We are talking, we are not arguing'" (C3; married 7 years). After the conflict, the participants mentioned talking with the child about what had happened, trying to calm the child down, or explaining that the situation of conflict was not related to the child: "'It is something that mom was trying to clear up with dad, and mom became short tempered', I tell him" (C7; married 9 years); "I explain, '[Son's name], dad is grumpy, let him calm down' or 'Don't worry, it is not because of you'" (C12; married 13 years). A certain proportion of the participants stated that they do not provide explanations to the child after the conflict: "Actually, I didn't tell her much. I hardly told her anything, because she saw us arguing" (C11; married 7 years).

Children's reactions to marital conflict in their presence. This subcategory encompasses topics which address the description of situations in which the members of the couple identified that the child witnessed conflictive interaction between them, and the child's reactions to this. According to the participants, on these occasions, the child intervened with the aim of interrupting the marital conflict or put hands over ears, bit nails, cried, or became sad or angry: "Initially, he [the son] says: 'Stop fighting' . . . Then he sees that isn't working . . . And then we get angry with him. And then he puts his hands over his ears, like this, and he becomes sad. And he gets angry as well" (C1; married 6 years). One couple identified that the child mentioned conflicts in previous situations: "I remember that she [the daughter] cried a lot, and was very frightened, and she remembers quite a lot. But even when she was about 4 years old, she said: 'Do you remember that time, that argument you had at the time of the Carnival?'" (C11; married 7 years). Three couples mentioned that they tried not to argue in front of the child.

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the characteristics of, and the strategies for resolving, marital and parental conflicts in families with children. The results revealed the use of constructive and destructive strategies for conflict resolution in the two subsystems investigated, corroborating the findings of other studies (Goeke-Morey et al., 2003; Rinaldi & Howe, 2003).

The marital conflicts arose for various reasons, most of which are described in the scientific literature, which indicates that among the main reasons for misunderstandings within couples, one finds content referring to the time that the spouses spend together, issues related to money, and the division of domestic tasks (Dillon et al., 2015; Mosmann & Falcke, 2011). Other reasons mentioned by the participants – such as jealousy, extramarital relationships or the use of alcohol – are also significant predictors of marital conflict (Fincham, 2003).

Regarding the resolution of marital conflicts, the participants mentioned strategies geared toward open communication, with assessment of alternatives and the seeking of solutions to problems – which may be understood as constructive (Cummings et al., 2016). Destructive strategies involve avoidance and verbal hostility. Regarding avoidance, it was observed from the participants' verbalizations that there was a distinction between avoidance and temporary withdrawal. Avoidance may be understood as a destructive strategy, in the sense that the spouses opt not to talk about the conflictive questions, and leave their quarrels to be resolved by time (Bolze et al., 2013). However, it should be clarified that avoidance is not always understood as a destructive strategy (Costa & Mosmann, 2015). There are couples who consider themselves satisfied with their marriages and are characterized as being of the avoiders type, that is, their style is to minimize the problems and avoid conflicts, emphasizing the positive aspects of the relationship (Driver, Tabares, Shapiro, & Gottman, 2016). The temporary withdrawal, in its turn, is described as the option to take some time out to reflect on the conflictive issue and discuss it later, which is configured as a constructive strategy; it is even recommended as an intervention in the clinic with couples (Stith, McCollum, & Rosen, 2011). In this way, avoidance is understood as a destructive strategy when the spouses perceive that they do not manage to resolve their conflictive issues – a fact which can result in the accumulation of bitterness and resentment which crystallizes over time, making them dissatisfied with the relationship.

The strategy of verbal hostility between the members of the couple may be understood as psychological aggression (Pendry, Carr, Papp, & Antles, 2013), as it mainly involves discussions which turn into arguments, permeated by the battle of wills between the partners, difficulties in giving way, and attempts to convince the other, with the aim of causing one's own opinion to prevail. Psychological aggression, described in the literature as the most common strategy between spouses, may be considered destructive. This is because it undermines each partner's self-esteem and entails emotional harm (Bolze et al., 2013; Razera, Mosmann, & Falcke, 2016).

It should be highlighted that there were no reports of physical violence between the spouses as a strategy for conflict resolution. One possible explanation for this is that it resulted from the low number of participants, or from the fact that the people who accepted to participate and contribute in the study were those characterized by more harmonious relationships. Furthermore, although all couples were part of families with young children, most of them had been together for more than 10 years. Thus, it is expected that the more time the couples have spent together and in intimacy, the more they are likely to be mature and able to deal with their problems. These aspects, however, are not shown to be linear even in dyads with long-term marriages, indicating the need for constant dialogue and adjustments over the years (Campos, Scorsolini-Comin, & Santos, 2017).

Regarding the conflicts between parents and children, these mainly encompassed parental difficulty in imposing limits or dealing with situations of tantrums or disobedience.

concerning the strategies used by the parents with the child, emphasis was placed on the constructive ones, involving nonviolent discipline – characterized by the parents giving explanations, punishments (temporary isolation) and withdrawal of privileges – as already indicated by other studies (Peruhype et al., 2011; Runyan et al., 2010). However, the results also evidenced the use of other strategies, such as asking the children to place themselves in the parents' position or asking what they would do in a specified situation, causing them to feel empathy and commitment. Another strategy reported was the parents saying sorry – which serves as a model that teaches the child the need to recognize her/his errors and seek to make up for them. As in the marital relationships, the strategies may be considered constructive as they involve conflict resolution through showing warmth, parental support, or saying sorry – allowing positive emotional reactions in the child (Bergman et al., 2016; Goeke-Morey et al., 2003; McCoy et al., 2013).

In contrast, the findings also revealed the use of destructive strategies with the child, involving physical and/or psychological aggression. The conflictive interactions with the child, permeated by psychological aggression, were evidenced through the inciting of fear or guilt, or by behaviors which involve threatening and/or tricking the child. It is stressed that psychological aggression is described as the destructive strategy used most by parents in situations of conflict with the child (Carmo & Alvarenga, 2012; Moura et al., 2008), and is associated with internalized and externalized behavioral problems (Liu & Wang, 2015a).

Among the destructive strategies that involve physical violence, the use was mainly observed of slaps and smacks with a slipper, both to punish and to oblige the child to do something, or to interrupt some behavior considered inappropriate by the parents. Contradictory arguments arose in relation to the use of physical punishments, some of which addressed parental remorse on one hand, but, on the other, an understanding that these measures are necessary in certain situations. This result is unsettling, as children whose parents approve of and use corporal punishment are more prone to endorse physical blows as a strategy for resolving interpersonal conflicts with siblings and peers (Simons & Wurtele, 2010). Besides this, the use of slaps, in particular, is associated with increasing the risk for various outcomes considered harmful to child development, such as increase in aggressiveness, and antisocial disorder, in externalizing and internalizing behaviors, in mental health problems and in negative relationships with the parents – besides lower cognitive ability and poor self-esteem (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016).

Also accessed were the parental reactions to the marital conflict in the presence of the child and, again, both constructive and destructive strategies could be detected. Asking the child to leave the room may function both as an approach for protecting the child and as something which leads to emotional reactions such as fear and distress, due to the fantasies which may arise due to knowing that the parents are arguing. Providing explanations about the conflictive interaction to calm the child, either during or after the conflict,

and interrupting the conflictive interaction, were also behaviors reported by the parents. These strategies may be described as either destructive or constructive (Bergman et al., 2016; Cummings & Davies, 2010). Some participants, however, admitted to not providing explanations about the conflict, a fact which is not necessarily configured as destructive, as the child does not always need to witness the resolution of the conflict. It is, however, important for the child to perceive that the tense emotional climate between the parents has been extinguished (Bergman et al., 2016; Cummings & Davies, 2010).

Regarding the occurrence of marital conflicts in the presence of the child, the couples mentioned, on these occasions, emotional reactivity in the child (showing sadness or anger), or behavioral manifestations (intervention with the aim of stopping the conflict, the child putting hands over ears, biting nails or crying), as has also been evidenced by other authors (Cummings et al., 2016). These findings are consistent with the literature, which indicates that the child, upon witnessing marital conflicts between the parents, may employ cognitive, behavioral and emotional efforts to signify and deal with these conflictive interactions (Goulart et al., 2015). The children's responses linked to emotional reactivity are associated with the use of destructive strategies for resolving marital conflicts, as these are shown to compromise the child's emotional security (Cummings & Davies, 2010).

Furthermore, one participant mentioned becoming angry with their son because he attempted to interrupt the conflict between him and his wife, which refers to the concept of the spillover effect (Erel & Burman, 1995), that is, the reverberation of the marital conflict to the parental relationship, indicating that the tense emotional climate which results from the conflictive situation overflows into the parent-child relationship (Goulart et al., 2015; Hameister et al., 2015; Liu & Wang, 2015b; Rinaldi & Howe, 2003). In addition, the fact that the child remembers conflict in previous situations indicates how traumatic the event can be when not managed appropriately (Cummings et al., 2016). It stands out that some couples reported seeking not to argue in front of the child – a behavior that, at first glance, may be considered constructive, so long as these couples do not opt for 'stonewalling', that is, nonverbal hostility, which is loaded with negative emotion (Cummings & Davies, 2010).

Goulart et al. (2015) draw attention to the multidimensional character of the conflict and to the existence of a multiplicity of factors which influence the children's vulnerability to the marital conflict. The present study does not discuss all the implications of the marital and parental conflict or the strategies for resolving these for the family functioning. Nevertheless, it contributes in the sense of characterizing the strategies used for resolving marital and parental conflicts, as well as some of the parents' and children's reactions to the conflictive interactions in the marital subsystem, evidencing that the families do not always manage their conflicts constructively, a fact which is configured as an important field of psychological practice.

It should be emphasized that international studies on conflicts and resolution strategies in the family ambit are frequent. Nevertheless, in the Brazilian context, there is a paucity of publications on this topic, which is shown to be of social relevance, given that the use of constructive strategies for resolving conflicts can contribute to healthy family functioning. As a result, investigating the conflict resolution strategies used most in the marital and parental relationships, as well as the parents' and children's reactions when the conflict occurs in the presence of the child, can contribute to the development of intervention strategies with families.

Thus, among the possible applications of this study for professional practice, emphasis is placed on the importance of providing spaces which allow reflection on family interactions – and, in particular, on constructive strategies for resolving marital and parental conflicts. This is because conflicts are inherent to human relationships and, therefore, to a greater or lesser extent, are part of everyday life for all families. Hence, besides offering support when needed for the clinical practice of family and marital therapists, it is understood that this study can contribute to the development of marital and parental psychoeducational interventions which aim to promote quality in family interactions.

Regarding the present study's limitations, emphasis is placed on the fact that data collection took place exclusively through the application of a semistructured interview with couples. In this regard, social desirability may have permeated the participants' reports, such that both the situations of marital and parental conflict, and the resolution strategies may have been described based in a positively unreal tendency. Moreover, the data referent to the parental conflicts and to the strategies adopted for resolving these, as well as the data relating to the parents' and children's reactions when the conflict took place in the child's presence, were collected exclusively from the mother and father, but not from the child. However, it is understood that these limitations do not weaken the present study's results, which corroborate the literature on this topic. Equally, the fact that participants were marital dyads made it possible to throw light on the specific characteristics of the dynamics of the families investigated, without the intention of generalizing.

It is suggested that future studies should include – besides interviews with the couples – individual interviews and the observation of the members of the parental and marital systems, perhaps in a task which involves resolving some conflictive situation. It is also recommended that data should be collected with the children, considering instruments which are adapted to the specific characteristics of the developmental stage, to investigate how the children experience the situations of marital and parental conflict. Finally, it is also suggested that further research should be undertaken with larger samples using mixed method approaches which could evidence, for example, differences between groups of mothers and fathers, by the time they have been together, age group or number of children.

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