



Co-parenting Mediates the Influence of Marital Satisfaction on Child Adjustment: The Conditional Indirect Effect by Parental Empathy

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Abstract

This study investigated the mediational role of co-parenting in the association between marital satisfaction and child adjustment, by exploring the conditional indirect effect by parental empathy. Using a sample of 101 Italian father-mother dyads with school-aged children, we administered to parents a series of measures in order to assess marital satisfaction, co-parenting, parents' empathic skills and children's adjustment. We computed conditional indirect analyses in order to analyze the mediational role of co-parenting in the associations between marital satisfaction and child adjustment. Consequently, we computed a moderated mediated model in order to explore if mothers' and fathers' empathic skills moderated the mediating role of co-parenting. Our findings showed that lower levels of co-parenting mediated the associations between mothers and fathers marital dissatisfaction and children's behavioral problems. Results also showed that this effect was moderated by parent's empathic skills, such that mediation is stronger for those with lower empathic competencies (moderated mediation).

Keywords Marital satisfaction · Co-parenting · Empathic skills · Child adjustment · Conditional indirect effect · Children

Substantial evidence suggests a consistent and robust relation between marital dissatisfaction and children's adjustment (Cummings and Davies 2010; Davies and Cummings 1994; Fosco and Grych 2008). More specifically, marital conflict was associated with a wide variety of difficulties for children and adolescents, including externalizing and internalizing problems, social maladjustment, deficits in cognitive competency, and even disruptions in physical health and biological functions (Camisasca 2013; Camisasca et al. 2013; 2016a; 2016b; Camisasca et al. 2017; Fosco and Grych 2008; Kouros et al. 2014; McCoy et al. 2013). Various mechanisms were proposed to explain the link between marital dissatisfaction/discord and child adjustment symptoms (e.g., Davies and Cummings 1994; Grych and Fincham 1990) and, consistent with family

systems theory, one proposed pathway was through disruptions to the co-parenting relationship.

Co-parenting is "a conceptual term that refers to the ways that parents and/or parental figures relate to each other in the role of parent" (Feinberg 2003; p. 96). Therefore, the co-parenting relationship is the component of marital relationships that pertains specifically to parenting together and it is through this relationship that parents negotiate their respective parental roles, responsibilities, and contributions to their children (Feinberg 2003; McHale et al. 2000). Evidence suggested that marital dissatisfaction affects both the supportive and negative (conflict and hostility) aspects of co-parenting (Baril et al. 2007; Camisasca et al. 2014; Camisasca et al. 2015; Camisasca et al. 2016c; Katz and Low 2004). In turn, a solid co-parenting alliance provides a foundation of inter-parental support that promotes parental adjustment (e.g., low stress and depression, high self-efficacy) and fosters more sensitive and attentive parenting, with positive impacts on the child's emotional security and adjustment. Empirical evidence suggested that the co-parenting alliance is relevant for children's social competence (Brody et al. 1998), self-regulation (Karreman et al. 2008), behavioral inhibition (Belsky et al. 1996), attachment (Brown et al. 2010), externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Camisasca et al. 2016c; LeRoy et al. 2013; Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2009; Teubert and Pinquart 2010).

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To date, few studies have examined co-parenting as a linking mechanism between the association of marital quality and child adjustment. For example, Katz and Low (2004) demonstrated that hostile-withdrawn co-parenting mediated the link between inter-parental violence and preschoolers' internalizing behavior. Similarly, co-parenting conflict mediated the prospective link between marital love (i.e., degree of attachment) and adolescents' risky behavior (Baril et al. 2007). Stroud et al. (2015) outlined that parents' marital functioning was positively related to the degree of positive affect, warmth, and enjoyment in the co-parenting relationship, which in turn was related to preschoolers' adjustment. Camisasca et al. (2016c) outlined that exposure of children to inter-parental conflict (an aspect of the family management dimension of co-parenting) mediated the associations between marital adjustment and internalizing behaviors, and both exposure of child to conflict and endorsement of partner's parenting jointly mediate the associations between marital adjustment and externalizing behaviors. Thus, these initial studies suggested that couple discord may influence children's functioning by eroding co-parenting quality.

Another important issue is the extent to which individual characteristics of the family members promote or hinder the co-parenting abilities. In order to understand why some couples are able to successfully co-parent together despite being in dissatisfied marriage, Talbot and McHale (2004) examined whether individual self-control and flexibility attenuate the detrimental effects of marital dissatisfaction on co-parenting behaviors. Results showed that fathers' flexibility buffered couples' co-parenting partnerships from the negative effects of marital distress.

Consistent with this study, Kolak and Volling (2007) hypothesized that parents' positive expressiveness (e.g., being appreciative, empathic, loving, and concerned) served as a protective factor making co-parenting quality less vulnerable to the effects of marital distress. According to Kolak and Volling (2007), husbands and wives, who were more openly and positively expressive with each other, may be better at communicating about co-parenting issues, despite marital distress. Results confirmed their hypothesis showing that, when considered in conjunction with marital quality, parents' positive expressiveness made unique contribution to co-parenting. Thus, personal characteristics such as flexibility and positive expressiveness, especially fathers', may be beneficial for co-parenting relations. Indeed, fathers' positive expressiveness protected couples from negative co-parenting interactions in the face of less supportive marriages (Kolak and Volling 2007).

A recent study (Jessee et al. 2018) outlined how higher levels of maternal Reflective Functioning (RF; the capacity to think about one's own and others' thoughts and feelings and understand the connections between mental states and

behaviors) could promote the co-parenting quality. According to the authors, "Wives higher on RF were more able to take their husband's perspective, anticipate how he may respond to a particular situation, and understand why he is behaving in a certain way, which may help spouses avoid conflict and interact more positively" (p. 194). More specifically, by considering others in terms of their mental states, these wives may be less likely to undermine their spouse's autonomy or compete with their partner for the child's attention.

A construct associated with reflective functioning is empathy. Empathy has been conceptualized in different ways; however, there is increasing consensus in defining empathy as a multidimensional construct, comprising both affective and cognitive components (Eisenberg and Fabes 1998). These components have been defined as empathic concern or sympathy and perspective taking, respectively (Davis 1980). Sympathy implies the expression of concern, compassion, and sympathy for another person based on the comprehension of his emotional state (Eisenberg and Fabes 1998). Perspective taking refers to the extent to which people are able to take someone else's perspective (Davis 1980; Eisenberg and Fabes 1998). Empathy appears to have important implications for couples and children. For example, Ehrenberg et al. (1996) showed that parents with a self-oriented, rather than other-oriented perspective, might over-evaluate their own personal importance to their children's lives and under-evaluate the significance of the other parent. Moreover, such parents had a general lower level of understanding of their children's point of view. Results confirmed their hypothesis, indicating that parents' empathy is directly associated with child-oriented parenting attitudes.

Moreover, research has demonstrated that parental empathy was associated with positive child outcomes (Feshbach 1987). Several studies suggested that empathic parents promote in their children greater self-esteem and functioning (Trumpeter et al. 2008), child and adolescent empathy (Soenens et al. 2007), and prosocial behavior (Christopher et al. 2013; Farrant et al. 2012). Furthermore, other studies illustrated that lower maternal empathy is associated with children's and adolescents' internalizing and externalizing problems (Psychogiou et al. 2008; Walker and Cheng 2007; Werner et al. 2015).

The present study, built on previous literature that outlined the mediating role of co-parenting in the associations between marital satisfaction and children's adjustment, is aimed to extend that work by examining the role of the parental empathic skills that could moderate these associations. More precisely, on the basis of the literature which outlines how individual factors (e.g., flexibility, reflective functioning and empathic skills) could foster both appropriate co-parenting relationships (Jesse et al. 2018; Talbot and McHale 2004), and positive child outcomes

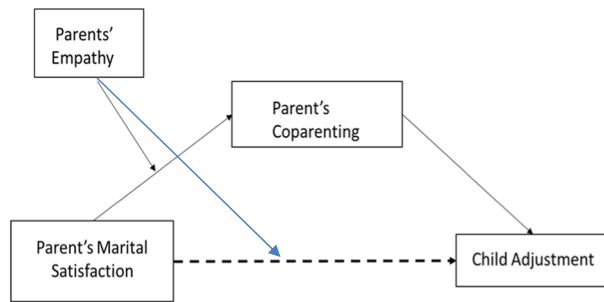


Fig. 1 Path diagram of hypothesis conceptual model. conditional indirect effect of marital satisfaction on child adjustment through coparenting

(Psychogiou et al. 2008; Werner et al. 2015), the present study had two aims. The first one was to investigate the mediating role of the perceived co-parenting quality in the associations between mothers' and fathers' marital satisfaction and children's adjustment, with the hypothesis that the parent's perceived co-parenting skills would mediate the links between marital satisfaction and child adjustment. The second aim was to examine whether both mothers' and fathers' empathic competencies moderate the indirect effects of marital satisfaction on child adjustment through the co-parenting relationship, with the hypothesis that high parental empathic skills could buffer the spillover of the emotions and behavioral patterns that typify the marital relationships into the co-parenting relationship. More precisely, we hypothesized that high parental empathic skills could lessen the predictive effects of marital dissatisfaction on child behavioral problems. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual diagrams of this moderated mediation model.

Method

Participants

Participants were 101 mothers and 101 fathers of Italian children (49.5% boys, 50.5% girls) ages 7–13 years ($M = 9.5$; $SD = 1.6$), recruited by four primary and secondary public schools located in Milan and in the province of Milan. The children were noted as being the only child (21.5%), the firstborn (47.3%), the second born (23.7%), and the third born (7.5%). The couples had been married 15.4 years on average ($SD = 5.0$). The mothers averaged 43.1 years of age ($SD = 4.6$) and the fathers averaged 45.5 years of age ($SD = 5.2$). We assessed the socio-economic status (SES) of participants' families by asking for parents' qualifications and jobs: 28% of participants were from lower-middle class, 55.4% from middle class and 16.6% from upper-middle class.

Procedure

The participating schools were recruited by introductory meetings with school principals and letters to the parents describing the goals and procedures of the study. Initially, we approached 175 Italian mother-father dyads, and 101 dyads of married parents agreed to participate in this study (acceptance rate: 58%). These parents signed consent forms that described the project and its goals, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of the data collected. We delivered packets consisting of self-report measures (see the "Measures" section) to parents. Measures were accompanied by a letter describing self-administration, in which mothers and fathers were asked to fill out the forms independently, without sharing their answers, and to return all the questionnaires within 2 months to the schools. All parents enrolled in the study returned the measures by the due time.

Measures

Marital Satisfaction

Both partners' marital satisfaction was assessed by the *Dyadic Satisfaction Scale* (10 items) of the *Dyadic Adjustment Scale* (DAS; Spanier 1976; Italian validation by Gentili et al. 2002). The DAS is a widely used 32-item self-report measure of the quality of the marital relationships, consisting of four subscales: (1) *Dyadic Consensus* (13 items), (2) *Dyadic Satisfaction* (10 items), (3) *Affectional Expression* (4 items), and (4) *Dyadic Cohesion* (5 items). In the present study, we specifically considered the *Dyadic Satisfaction*, in order to gain the perspective of both partners about their marital positive or negative interactions. We were indeed interested in gaining information about the degree to which each partner of the couple is satisfied with his/her relationship, expressed in the frequency of positive interactions, or conversely, in quarrels, disagreements, conflicts and thoughts of separation or divorce (e.g., "Do you confide in your mate?"; "How often do you discuss or have you considered divorce, separation, or terminating your relationship?"). Items' ratings of the DAS vary with rating of agreements ranging from 0 (always disagree) to 5 (always agree), rating of frequency from 0 (all the Time) to 5 (never) or from 0 (none) to 4 (all), dichotomous ratings ranging from 0 (yes) to 1 (no), and qualitative ratings ranging from 0 (extremely unhappy) to 6 (perfect). The values of internal consistency of the Italian validation of the DAS (Gentili et al. 2002) correspond to: $\alpha = .93$ for the *Total Adjustment*; $\alpha = .89$ for the *Dyadic Consensus*; $\alpha = .87$ for the *Dyadic Satisfaction*; $\alpha = .63$ for the *Affective Expression*; and $\alpha = .78$ for the *Dyadic Cohesion*. In our sample,

the values of internal consistency for the *Dyadic Satisfaction* were: $\alpha = .78$ (mothers) and $\alpha = .76$ (fathers).

Parents' Empathic Skills

Cognitive and affective components of empathy of both parents were measured by administering the two subscales: *Perspective Taking* and *Empathic Concern* of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis 1980; Italian validation: Albiero et al. 2006). The IRI was developed in order to integrate the multidimensionality of empathy. It is a self-report instrument scored on a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (doesn't describe me at all) to 4 (describes me very well). The 7-item subscale *Perspective Taking* measures the ability to adopt the perspective of others in common life (e.g., "I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective"), while the *Empathic Concern* assesses the tendency to experience feelings of compassion and sympathy from others' misfortune (e.g., "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than I"). The values of internal consistency of the Italian validation of the IRI are satisfactory (α from .69 to .75). In our sample, the values of internal consistency were: *Perspective Taking*: $\alpha = .78$ (mothers) and $\alpha = .76$ (fathers); *Empathic Concern*: $\alpha = .70$ (mothers) and $\alpha = .69$ (fathers).

Co-parenting Relationship

Mothers and fathers completed the Co-parenting Relationship Scale (CRS; Feinberg et al. 2012). The measure consists of 35 items on a 7-point scale from not true of us to very true of us. The following subscales were used in this paper: agreement (e.g., "My partner and I have the same goals for our child"), parenting-based closeness (e.g., "My relationship with my partner is stronger now than before we had a child"), exposure to conflict (e.g., "How often in a typical week, when all 3 of you are together, do you yell at each other within earshot of the child?"), support (e.g., "My partner asks my opinion on issues related to parenting"), undermining (e.g., "My partner does not trust my abilities as a parent"), and endorsement of partner's parenting ("I believe my partner is a good parent"). In the present paper, alphas for the scales ranged from .70 to .85 for mothers and from .71 to .84 for fathers. We computed a total index of *Co-parenting Competencies* for both mothers and fathers, by considering the total score of the CRS.

Children's Adjustment

Both parents completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL/4–18; Achenbach and Rescorla 2001; Italian

version by Frigerio 2001), which is one of the most extensively used measures of children's adjustment, in terms of internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Parents rated the 113 items of the measure as 0 (not true), 1 (somewhat or sometimes true), or 2 (very true or often true). The *Internalizing Scale* reflects a pattern of maladjustment characterized by social withdrawal or shyness (e.g., "Complains of loneliness") and symptoms of depression or anxiety (e.g., "Cries all the time" or "I feel worthless or inferior"). The *Externalizing Scale* captures children's maladjustment characterized by aggression ("Gets in many fights") and defiance ("Disobedient at school"). In our study, we found adequate reliability for internalizing (for mothers $\alpha = .88$ and for fathers $\alpha = .84$) and externalizing problems (for mothers $\alpha = .85$ and for fathers $\alpha = .86$). By summing the internalizing and externalizing scores, in the present study, we considered the *Total Problems Score* of both mothers' and fathers' ($r = .73$). Then, we converted mothers' and fathers' reports into z-scores and then computed the mean score to create a single parental index of child adjustment problems.

Data Analyses

Descriptive statistics were computed for all the variables. Pearson's r correlations were used to investigate the associations between the variables. In order to investigate the indirect effect of marital satisfaction to child adjustment through co-parenting (the first aim of the study), two mediation models (one for mothers and one for fathers) were examined using the Process Macro for SPSS (Hayes 2012), applying Model 4 with 5000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples. The bias corrected bootstrapping resampling method is particularly suitable for small samples (Hayes 2012). In the two mediation models, parent's marital satisfaction was added as predictor, child adjustment as an outcome, and perceived co-parenting quality as a mediator. Furthermore, in order to examine whether both mothers' and fathers' empathic competencies moderated the indirect effects of marital satisfaction on child adjustment through the co-parenting relationship (the second aim of the study), two moderated mediation models were examined using the Process Macro for SPSS (Hayes and Preacher 2013), applying Model 8 with 5000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples. Such a model allows the direct and/or indirect effects of an independent variable X on a dependent variable Y through one or more mediators (M) to be moderated (Hayes 2012). Hayes and Preacher (2013) use the term conditional process modeling to encompass terms such as moderated mediation and mediated moderation. Hayes (2012) suggests using PROCESS Model 8, which simultaneously tests mediated moderation and a specific type of moderation called "first stage and direct effect moderation". This model

Table 1 Correlational analyses, means, standard deviations of the investigated variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
1. Empathy (IRI: mothers)	1							49.31	6.24	36–64
2. Empathy (IRI: fathers)	.486**	1						46.76	6.76	34–65
3. Marital Satisfaction (DAS: mothers)	-.093	-.009	1					37.34	5.60	21–49
4. Marital Satisfaction (DAS: fathers)	-.199*	.087	.717**	1				38.21	5.14	26–49
5. Coparenting (CRS: mothers)	.273**	.287**	.488**	.393**	1			5.05	0.68	2.94–6
6. Coparenting (CRS: fathers)	.179	.307**	.452**	.434**	.686**	1		5.07	0.67	3.17–5.91
7. Child Adjustment (CBCL)	-.243*	-.262**	-.291**	-.263**	-.453**	-.404**	1	12.99	8.12	0–38

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

allows the direct and indirect effects of an independent variable (X) on a dependent variable (Y) through a mediator (M) to be moderated (W). First stage moderation refers to the moderation of the a -path in a mediation model and is denoted by significant a_3 -path. Direct effect moderation refers to the moderation of the c -path in a mediation model and is denoted by a significant c_3 -path. Hayes (2012) strongly discourages the interpretation of the output through the lens of mediated moderation because this interpretation takes the focus off X and places it on the interaction of XW and its indirect effect. Instead, Hayes suggests focusing on the moderation of the indirect and direct effects of X by W , which returns the focus back to X as the causal agent of interest and how its causal effect depends on W . In moderated mediation, the indirect effect through the mediator is constructed as the product of the $X \rightarrow M$ effect, which is conditional on W (i.e., $a_1 + a_3W$) and the $M \rightarrow Y$ effect (b_1). Thus, the indirect effect of X on Y through M is no longer a single quantity but is, instead, a function of W and hence is conditional $(a_1 + a_3W)b_1$.

Once more, in Model 8, marital satisfaction was entered as a predictor, child adjustment as an outcome, and perceived co-parenting quality as mediator. A p value of .05 was set as the critical level for statistical significance (for the analysis of indirect effects, if the 95% confidence interval includes 0 then the indirect effect is not significant at the .05 level, if 0 is not in the interval then the indirect effect is statistically significant at the .05 level; Hayes and Preacher 2013).

Results

Associations between Marital Satisfaction, Co-parenting, Child Adjustment and Parent's Empathic Skills

Correlations, means, and standard deviations of all variables used in the present study are presented in Table 1. Regarding the variables investigated, the means scores, for

mothers, fathers and children, were similar to those obtained in other Italian and international studies with normative samples (Camisasca et al. 2016c; Feinberg et al. 2012; Frigerio 2001; Gentili et al. 2002) and were placed within normal limits. Moreover, ANOVA results showed that SES and the other children's order of geniture were not associated with any variable of interest (SES: $F_{(2,98)}$ from .04 to 1.1 with p from .31 to .95; order of geniture: $F_{(3,97)}$ from .31 to 2.1 with p from .11 to .81). For both mothers and fathers (see Table 1), the correlation analyses showed that the variables were correlated. In particular, marital satisfaction was positively correlated to co-parenting ($r = .48$ and $r = .43$) and negatively associated with children's behavioral problems ($r = -.29$ and $r = -.26$). Mothers' and fathers' perceived co-parenting were also negatively correlated to children's behavioral problems ($r = -.45$ and $r = -.40$) and positively correlated to both parents' empathic skills ($r = .27$ and $r = .30$).

The Mediational Role of Co-parenting

In order to investigate the mediational role of co-parenting in the association between marital satisfaction and child adjustment, we performed mediational analyses using the Process Macro for SPSS (Hayes and Preacher 2013), applying Model 4 with 5000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples (see Table 2).

Results showed that the total effect of marital satisfaction on children's behavioral problems was significant (mother: $\beta = -.39$ $p = .004$; father: $\beta = -.36$ $p = .016$; c path). The effect of marital satisfaction on the co-parenting relationship (mother: $\beta = .06$; $p = .000$; father: $\beta = .06$; $p = .000$; a path) was also significant. When the effect of co-parenting was controlled, the direct effect of marital satisfaction on children's behavioral problems was not significant (mother: $\beta = -.07$, $p > .05$; father: $\beta = -.09$, $p > .05$; c' path). Therefore, the perceived co-parenting skills mediated the relationship between marital satisfaction and children's behavioral problems (mother: $\beta = -.32$, $p = .0003$; father: $\beta = -.26$ $p = .002$).

Table 2 Indirect effects of marital satisfaction on children's adjustment through co-parenting

	Coefficient	SE	Bootstrap 95% CI	Model R ²	(<i>p</i>)
DV: child adjustment				.29	<.01
Marital satisfaction (mothers)					
Total effect	−.39	.13			<.01
Direct effect	−.07	.14			>.05
Indirect effect via mediator					
Mothers' co-parenting	−.32	.08	−.58; −.13		
DV: child adjustment				.26	<.01
Marital satisfaction (fathers)					
Total effect	−.36	.15			<.05
Direct effect	−.09	.15			>.05
Indirect effect via mediator					
Fathers' co-parenting	−.26	.08	−.56; −.11		

The Indirect Effect of Marital Satisfaction on Child Adjustment Through Co-parenting Conditioned by Parents' Empathy

Given evidence for the indirect effect of marital satisfaction on children's adjustment through co-parenting, we then evaluated whether this indirect effect was conditioned by both mothers' and fathers' empathic skills (the second aim of the study). The presence of mediated moderation was tested in the conditional process model (Model 8), using PROCESS.

At first, we tested the moderating effects of both parents' empathic skills on the relationship between marital satisfaction and co-parenting ($X \rightarrow M$). Significant moderating effects were observed in the tested models, for both mothers and fathers. Empathic skills moderated the effect of marital satisfaction on the co-parenting relationship (mother: Interaction Coeff. = $-.00$, 95% CI = $-.007; -.000$, $p = .01$; father: Interaction Coeff. = $-.00$, 95% CI = $-.007; -.000$, $p = .04$). In order to further explore this moderation effects we performed two "Model 1" in PROCESS (Hayes and Preacher 2013), one for mothers and one for fathers. In these models, the co-parenting relationship was entered as the outcome variable, mother's and fathers' empathic competences as the moderator (M) variable, and marital satisfaction as the independent variable. The overall models were significant (mothers: $F = 19.43$, $p < .001$; fathers: $F = 22.10$, $p < .001$), accounting for 37 and 40% of the overall variance in the co-parenting relationship scores. Data also showed (see Table 3) that, for mothers, marital satisfaction was significantly associated to the co-parenting relationship, both at lower and higher levels of empathy. However, at lower levels of empathic skills, the predictive effect of marital satisfaction on co-parenting was highest (mothers: lower level: Coeff. = $.08$, $p < .001$; highest level: Coeff. = $.03$; $p < .05$). Unlike for mothers (see Table 4), at higher

levels of empathic competencies, fathers' marital satisfaction was not predictive of the co-parenting relationship (Fathers: lower level: Coeff. = $.07$, $p < .001$; highest level: Coeff. = $.02$; $p > .05$). Secondly, we tested the moderating effects of both parents' empathic skills on the relationship between marital satisfaction and child adjustment ($X \rightarrow Y$). Significant moderating effects were observed in the tested models, for both mothers and fathers (see Tables 3 and 4). Empathic skills moderated the effect of marital satisfaction on the children's adjustment problems (mother: Interaction Coeff. = $.05$; 95% CI = $.001; .107$, $p < .05$; father: Interaction Coeff. = $.05$, 95% CI = $.006; .097$, $p < .05$). In order to further explore these moderation effects we performed two "Model 1" in PROCESS (Hayes and Preacher 2013), one for mothers and one for fathers. In these models, the child adjustment was entered as the outcome variable, mother's and fathers' empathic competences as the moderator (M) variable, and marital satisfaction as the independent variable. The overall models were significant (mothers: $F = 10.75$, $p < .001$; fathers: $F = 7.40$, $p < .01$), accounting for 25 and 19% of the overall variance in the child adjustment scores.

Then, the conditional direct effects of X on Y and the conditional indirect effects of X on Y through M , for both mothers and fathers were tested. For both mothers and fathers, the conditional direct effects of marital satisfaction on child adjustment were significant only at lower levels of empathic competences (see Table 4). Finally, we checked the formal tests, based on an inference about the index of moderated mediation. If the confidence interval for the index of moderated mediation includes zero, then there is no substantial evidence of moderation of the indirect effect. However, if the confidence interval does not include zero, then one can claim that the indirect effect is conditional on the moderator (moderated mediation). Results indicated that the indirect effect of marital satisfaction (for both mothers

Table 3 Conditional effects of mothers' marital satisfaction on co-parenting and children's adjustment

	Coefficient	SE	Bootstrap 95% CI	Model R ²	(<i>p</i>)
DV: co-parenting				.37	<.001
Marital satisfaction (mothers)	.27	.09	.096;.454		<.001
Empathy (mothers)	.19	.06	.059;.326		<.01
Marital satisfaction × empathy interaction	−.00	.00	−007;−.000		<.01
Conditional effect at values of the moderator mothers' empathy					
Minus one SD from mean: 40	.08	.01	.059;.120		<.001
Mean: 46	.06	.00	.043;.082		<.001
Plus one SD from mean: 53	.03	.01	.006;.064		<.05
DV: child adjustment				.25	<.001
Marital satisfaction (mothers)	−.372	1.1	−6.01; −1.43		<.001
Empathy (mothers)	−2.86	.86	−4.57;−1.15		<.01
Marital satisfaction × empathy interaction	.06	.02	.020;.112		<.01
Conditional effect at values of the moderator fathers' empathy					
Minus one SD from mean: 40	−.85	.19	−1.24;−.473		<.001
Mean: 46	−.44	.12	−.688;−.192		<.01
Plus one SD from mean: 53	−.02	.18	−.397;.355		>.05

and fathers) on children's adjustment through the co-parenting relationship were found to be moderated by both parents' empathy. The index of moderated mediation showed that for mothers, the 95% bootstrap confidence interval was .001 to .050; and, for fathers, was .000 to .030. Namely, for mothers, lower levels of empathic skills produced a stronger indirect effect of marital satisfaction on children's behavioral problems, through the co-parenting relationship; and, in case of fathers, at the highest level of empathic skills, the indirect effect of marital satisfaction on children's behavioral problems was not significant (Coeff = −.06; 95% CI = −.20; .05) (Tables 5 and 6).

Discussion

The current study investigated the mediational role of co-parenting in the association between marital satisfaction and child adjustment, by exploring the conditional indirect effect by parental empathy. The mediational results illustrated that, for both mothers and fathers, the predictive effects of partners' lower levels of marital satisfaction on children's behavioral problems were mediated by a lower quality of perceived co-parenting relationship. In other words, results supported the hypothesis that the perceived quality of the co-parenting relationship could be an important mediator of the association between the quality of marital relationship and child adjustment. More precisely, our results were consistent with literature that showed how parents' ability to work together as partners (in contrast to being adversaries) is an important mediator of the association between marital satisfaction and

children's positive psychological adjustment (Baril et al. 2007; Camisasca et al. 2016c; Katz and Low 2004; Stroud et al. 2015). In line with the cited literature, it is possible to assume that a perceived cohesive co-parenting relationship provides a foundation of support for each parent that promotes warm and sensitive parenting, and thus has positive impacts on children's emotional security and psychological adjustment.

The central innovative step of the present study was the examination of these constructs using a moderated mediation approach, which explored the moderating role of parent's empathic skills. To date, there are no studies that explored the buffering effects of parental empathic skills on the links among marital satisfaction, co-parenting, and child adjustment. Consistent with literature reporting that, individual positive psychological characteristics could attenuate the detrimental effects of marital dissatisfaction on the co-parenting relationship (Talbot and McHale 2004; Kolak and Volling 2007), we proposed that parents, with higher empathic competencies, could be better able to put aside their couple dissatisfactions, in order to cooperate in responding to the needs of their child. The results appeared to support the hypothesis, by showing that, for both mothers and fathers, the indirect effects of marital satisfaction on children's behavioral problems, through the perceived co-parenting relationship, were moderated by parent's empathy. More precisely, results showed that these parents' empathic competencies moderated the effects of marital satisfaction on the perceived co-parenting relationship ($X \rightarrow M$) and the effects of marital satisfaction on the child adjustment ($X \rightarrow Y$) through the co-parenting relationship. More specifically, for mothers, at higher levels of empathic

Table 4 Conditional effects of fathers' marital satisfaction on co-parenting and children's adjustment

	Coefficient	SE	Bootstrap 95% CI	Model R ²	(<i>p</i>)
DV: co-parenting				.40	<.001
Marital satisfaction (fathers)	.22	.08	.069;.386		<.01
Empathy (fathers)	.17	.07	.032;.3311		<.05
Marital satisfaction × empathy interaction	−.00	.00	−.007;−.000		<.05
Conditional effect at values of the moderator fathers' empathy					
Minus one SD from mean: 40	.07	.01	.043;.102		<.001
Mean: 46	.05	.01	.025;.070		<.001
Plus one SD from mean: 53	.02	.01	−.014;.059		>.05
DV: child adjustment				.19	<.001
Marital satisfaction (fathers)	−3.22	1.04	−4.54;−1.00		<.001
Empathy (fathers)	−2.77	.89	−4.54;−1.00		<.001
Marital satisfaction × empathy interaction	.06	.02	.018;.109		<.01
Conditional effect at values of the moderator fathers' empathy					
Minus one SD from mean: 40	−.67	.18	−1.04;−.298		<.001
Mean: 46	−.23	.14	−.530;−.050		<.05
Plus one SD from mean: 53	.19	.23	−.275;.660		>.05

skills, the power of the significant association between marital satisfaction and the perceived co-parenting relationship was less significant than at lower levels of empathic skills. For fathers, results showed that at higher levels of empathic skills, marital satisfaction did not predict the perceived co-parenting relationship ($X \rightarrow M$; a path). In other words, it is possible to say that when mothers and fathers have higher empathic competencies the spillover effects of the emotions, moods and behaviors from the couple to the perceived co-parenting relationships is less strong. These data were consistent with literature that outlined how individuals, with good empathic and reflective functioning, are more able to put aside the negative feelings about their distressed marital relationships and to cooperate with their partners as co-parents (Ehrenberg et al. 1996; Jessee et al. 2018).

Results also showed that the effects of marital satisfaction on children's adjustment ($X \rightarrow Y$) became not significant at higher levels of parents' empathic competences. This could mean that empathic parents could be able preserve their children's adjustment, also in presence of a dissatisfied marital relationship. These results were supported by the literature that outlined the protective role of empathic and reflective competences for the child development (Camisasca & Di Blasio, 2014; Psychogiou et al. 2008; Werner et al. 2015).

Finally, results showed that, for both mothers and fathers, the indirect effects of marital satisfaction on child adjustment, through the mediation of the perceived co-parenting relationship was moderated by empathy. More precisely, for mothers, lower levels of empathic skills produced a stronger indirect effect of marital satisfaction on children's behavioral problems, through the co-parenting

relationship and, in case of fathers, at highest levels of empathic skills, the indirect effect of marital satisfaction on children's behavioral problems was not significant. More precisely, for fathers, empathy seems to be more beneficial for the perceived co-parenting relationship ($X \rightarrow M$ path) and this result is in line with those of Kolak and Volling (2007), and Talbot and Mc Hale (2004) that indicated how fathers' personal characteristics, such as positive expressiveness and flexibility, predicted the co-parenting relations. When fathers were highly empathic, the perceived co-parenting interactions were more likely to be cooperative and supportive, and also the indirect effects of marital satisfaction on child adjustment disappeared. In line with Talbot and McHale (2004), it seem that such competencies in fathers would be regarded as especially conducive to co-parenting harmony when viewed from the perspective of the maternal gate-keeping hypothesis. More precisely, maternal gatekeeping is commonly defined as mothers' preferences and attempts to inhibit fathers' participation in family work (Allen and Hawkins 1999) and, according to this premise, mothers are typically more influential than fathers in structuring or orchestrating family processes. This pattern emerges because mothers tend more often to be the primary caregivers of their children and attain greater skill in childcare than do fathers. In the present sample, mothers did devote significantly more hours per week to care of the child than did fathers (40 for mothers as opposed to 30 for fathers, $F_{(1, 100)} = 3.38$, $p < .001$). If, as the maternal gate-keeping hypothesis proposes, this disparity rendered mothers more likely to take the lead in family interactions, then it becomes clear how fathers' readiness to accept their partners' guidance would facilitate cooperation and mutual engagement in co-parenting.

Table 5 Conditional indirect effects of mothers' marital satisfaction on children's adjustment

Co-parenting	Coefficient	SE	Bootstrap 95% CI	<i>t</i>	(<i>p</i>)
Constant	−6.80	3.34	−13.344;−.158	−2.03	<.05
Marital satisfaction (mothers)	.27	.09	.096;.454	3.05	<.001
Mothers' empathy	.19	.06	.0659;.326	2.87	<.01
Marital satisfaction × empathy interaction	−.00	.00	−.007;−.001	−2.38	<.01
Model $R = .61$ $R^2 = .27$; $MSE = .29$; $F = 19.43$; $p < .001$					
Child adjustment	Coefficient	SE	Bootstrap 95% CI	<i>t</i>	(<i>p</i>)
Constant	144.8	42.75	61.39;228.25	3.44	<.01
Marital satisfaction (mothers)	−2.67	1.15	−4.97;−.37	−2.09	<.01
Co-parenting	−437	1.42	−6.28;−1.32	−305	<.01
Mothers' empathy	−2.13	.86	−3.83;−.247	−2.47	<.05
Marital satisfaction × empathy interaction	.05	.02	.004;.095	2.18	<.05
Model $R = .562$; $R^2 = .31$; $MSE = 44.73$; $F = 11.08$; $p < .001$					
	Boot indirect effect	Boot SE	Bootstrap 95% CI		
Conditional direct effect of <i>X</i> on <i>Y</i> at range of values of mothers' empathy					
10th percentile 40	−.66	.27	−1.20;−.12		
25th percentile 45	−.41	.18	−.78;−.04		
50th percentile 49	−.21	.14	−.50;.07		
75th percentile 53	−.01	.15	−.32;.29		
90th percentile 57	.18	.21	−.23;.60		
Conditional indirect effect of <i>X</i> on <i>Y</i> at range of values of mothers' empathy					
10th percentile 40	−.39	.17	−.79;−.11		
25th percentile 45	−.30	.12	−.59;−.09		
50th percentile 49	−.24	.09	−.46;−.07		
75th percentile 53	−.17	.07	−.36;−.05		
90th percentile 57	−.11	.07	−.30;−.01		

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations of this study. First, the causal directions of relations among variables examined cannot be empirically evaluated because this study is cross-sectional. Without measuring marital satisfaction, co-parenting, and children's adjustment over time, this study cannot draw inferences about directional effects. Reverse causal directions and bi-directionality are plausible alternative hypotheses. Longitudinal studies could therefore assist in elucidating the possible developmental sequences related to the psychological paths suggest by our model and their interrelationships. Another limitation of the study is the use of self-reported data that can be subject to social desirability and can inflate associations among variables. In addition, our sample was composed of Italian parents who were predominantly well-educated and middle class; replications of our findings with a more heterogeneous sample would foster a generalization of findings to a broader population. Future research should also use a multimethod approach, including

observational methods, teacher reports, and interviews. Most important, future studies could also examine which components of empathy (sympathy and perspective taking) are leading to the moderated mediation effect explored and better investigate their specific effects on the quality of parent-child interactions and on children's outcomes.

Moreover, future research could also examine how parents' empathic skills and related capacities such as flexibility and reflective functioning may overlap and specifically affect co-parenting behaviors and the children's outcomes. Therefore, understanding how the elements of empathy function in the process leading to healthy outcomes in families provide implication for health care providers (Geiger et al. 2016). More specifically, training for these workers could be encouraged to support and acknowledge the importance of empathic skills in terms of empathic sensitivity, empathic listening, self-other awareness, perspective-taking, suspension of one's own thoughts and feelings that could foster couple and family relationships (Angera and Long 2008).

Table 6 Conditional indirect effects of fathers' marital satisfaction on children's adjustment

Co-parenting	Coefficient	SE	Bootstrap 95% CI	<i>t</i>	(<i>p</i>)
Constant	−4.78	3.20	−11.30; −1.57	−212	<.05
Marital satisfaction (fathers)	.22	.08	.059;.386	3.52	<.001
Fathers' empathy	.17	.07	.032;.311	3.11	<.05
Marital satisfaction × empathy interaction	−.00	.001	−.007; −.001	−2.67	<.01
Model <i>R</i> = .54 <i>R</i> ² = .29; MSE = .32; <i>F</i> = 13.20; <i>p</i> < .001					
Child adjustment	Coefficient	SE	Bootstrap 95% CI	<i>t</i>	(<i>p</i>)
Constant	134,567	39.78	55.65;213.41	3.38	<.01
Marital satisfaction (fathers)	−243	1.04	−.402; −.352	−2.32	<.01
Co-parenting	−353	1.25	−.602; −1.05	−331	<.01
Fathers' empathy	−2.16	.88	−3.90; −.401	−2.44	<.05
Marital satisfaction × empathy interaction	.05	.02	.006;.0955	2.28	<.05
Model <i>R</i> = .50; <i>R</i> ² = .25; MSE = 49.48; <i>F</i> = 7.95; <i>p</i> < .001					
Boot indirect effect		Boot SE	Bootstrap 95% CI		
Conditional direct effect of X on Y at range of values of mothers' empathy					
10th percentile 39	−.46	.21	−.89; −.02		
25th percentile 42	−.31	.18	−.66;.03		
50th percentile 45	−.15	.15	−.46;.14		
75th percentile 51	.14	.19	−.23;.52		
90th percentile 55	.34	.25	−.16;.85		
Conditional indirect effect of X on Y at range of values of mothers' empathy					
10th percentile 39	−.27	.12	−.53; −.05		
25th percentile 42	−.23	.10	−.45; −.04		
50th percentile 45	−.19	.08	−.38; −.03		
75th percentile 51	−.11	.06	−.26; −.00		
90th percentile 55	−.06	.06	−.20;.05		

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval In the treatment of the subjects, we have complied with APA and AIP (Associazione Italiana di Psicologia), ethical standards and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Catholic University of Milan in April 2013.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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