

Marital Processes Linking Economic Hardship to Mental Health across the Middle Years: The Role of Neurotic Vulnerability

Catherine W. O'Neal & K.A.S. Wickrama

The University of Georgia
National Council on Family Relations
Orlando, Florida
November 16, 2017



The University of Georgia

Department of Human Development and Family Science



Theoretical Background

- Life course stress process perspective
- Vulnerability-Stress Adaptation Model (VSAM) (Karney & Bradbury, 1995)
- *Enduring vulnerabilities and external stressors shape adaptive marital processes*
 - Enduring vulnerability = personal characteristics such as neuroticism
 - External stressor = life experience such as economic hardship
 - Adaptive process = trajectories of marital hostility



The University of Georgia

Department of Human Development and Family Science

Theoretical Background

- Outcomes of maladaptive processes:
 - Declining marital quality
 - Poor mental health
 - Poor physical health

Bookwala, 2005; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Miller, Hollist, Olsen, & Law, 2013; Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007; Wickrama, Lorenz, Conger, & Elder, 1997



The University of Georgia

Department of Human Development and Family Science

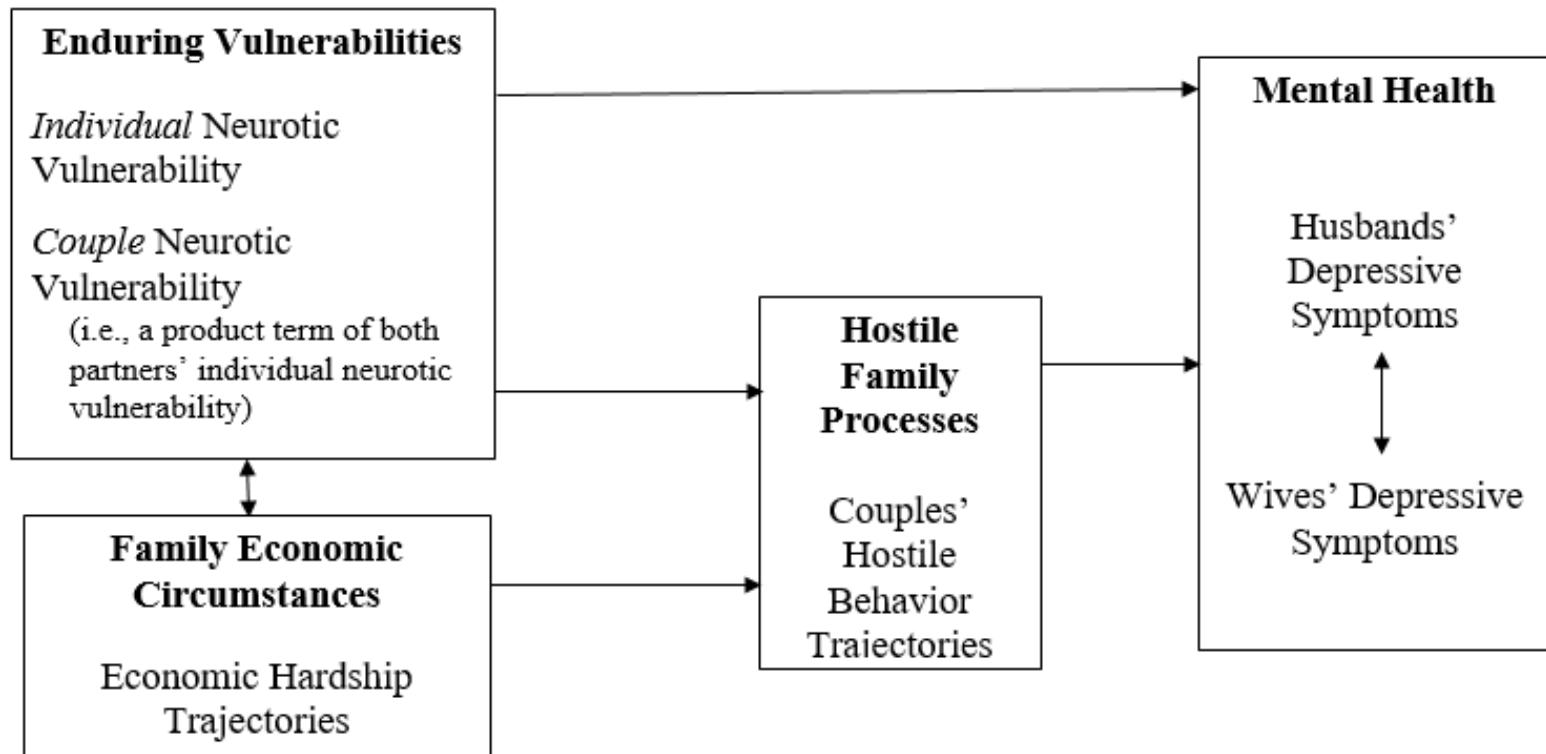


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for the current study.



The University of Georgia

Department of Human Development and Family Science

Neurotic Vulnerability

- *Neuroticism* is linked to mental health outcomes and marital behavior (Hellmuth & McNulty, 2008)
- Neurotic vulnerability
 - Component of personal-trait neuroticism (Costa & McCrae, 1992)
 - Representing psychological vulnerability
 - Increased stress sensitivity, inability to manage stress
- Couple neurotic vulnerability
 - Product term of husbands' and wives' neurotic vulnerability
 - Individual vulnerability may be exacerbated by their partner's vulnerability



Current Study

- **370** couples in enduring marriages who provided data in 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1994, and 2001
- M age = 39 and 34 for husbands and wives in 1989
- Using an SEM framework to examine:
 - Family economic hardship trajectories
 - 1989-1991
 - Neurotic vulnerability of each spouse
 - 1991
 - Couple-level marital hostility trajectories
 - 1991-1994
 - Depressive symptoms of husbands and wives
 - 2001



The University of Georgia

Department of Human Development and Family Science

Measures

- Neurotic vulnerability (NEO-PI personality inventory; Costa & McCrae, 1992)
 - 8 items; 5-point scale; α from .84 to .86
 - E.g., "I can handle myself pretty well in a crisis."
 - Product term computed after centering and transforming to a positive scale to assess couple neurotic vulnerability
- Family economic hardship
 - Trajectories from 1989-1991
 - Sum score from 27 items (Dohrenwend, Askenasy, Krasnoff, and Dohrenwend, 1978)
 - E.g., "borrowed money to help pay bills"



The University of Georgia

Department of Human Development and Family Science

Measures, Cont.

- Marital hostility (Matthews, Wickrama, & Conger, 1996)
 - Trajectories from 1991-1994
 - 7-point scale; α ranging from .80 to .85
 - Partner reports; “e.g., got angry with you”
- Depressive Symptoms (SCL-90; Deorgatis & Melisaratos, 1983)
 - Assessed in 1991 and 2001
 - 9 items; 5-point scale; α ranging from .80 to .91
 - E.g., “feelings of worthlessness”



The University of Georgia

Department of Human Development and Family Science

Analyses

- SEM in Mplus
- Univariate growth curves assessing:
 - Family economic hardship
 - Husbands' and wives' marital hostility (partner report)
 - Ultimately utilized a second-order growth curve capturing trajectories of couple-level hostility
- Comprehensive model incorporating growth curves
 - Explaining variation in depressive symptoms in 2001 after accounting for 1991
- Moderating role of couple neurotic vulnerability



The University of Georgia

Department of Human Development and Family Science

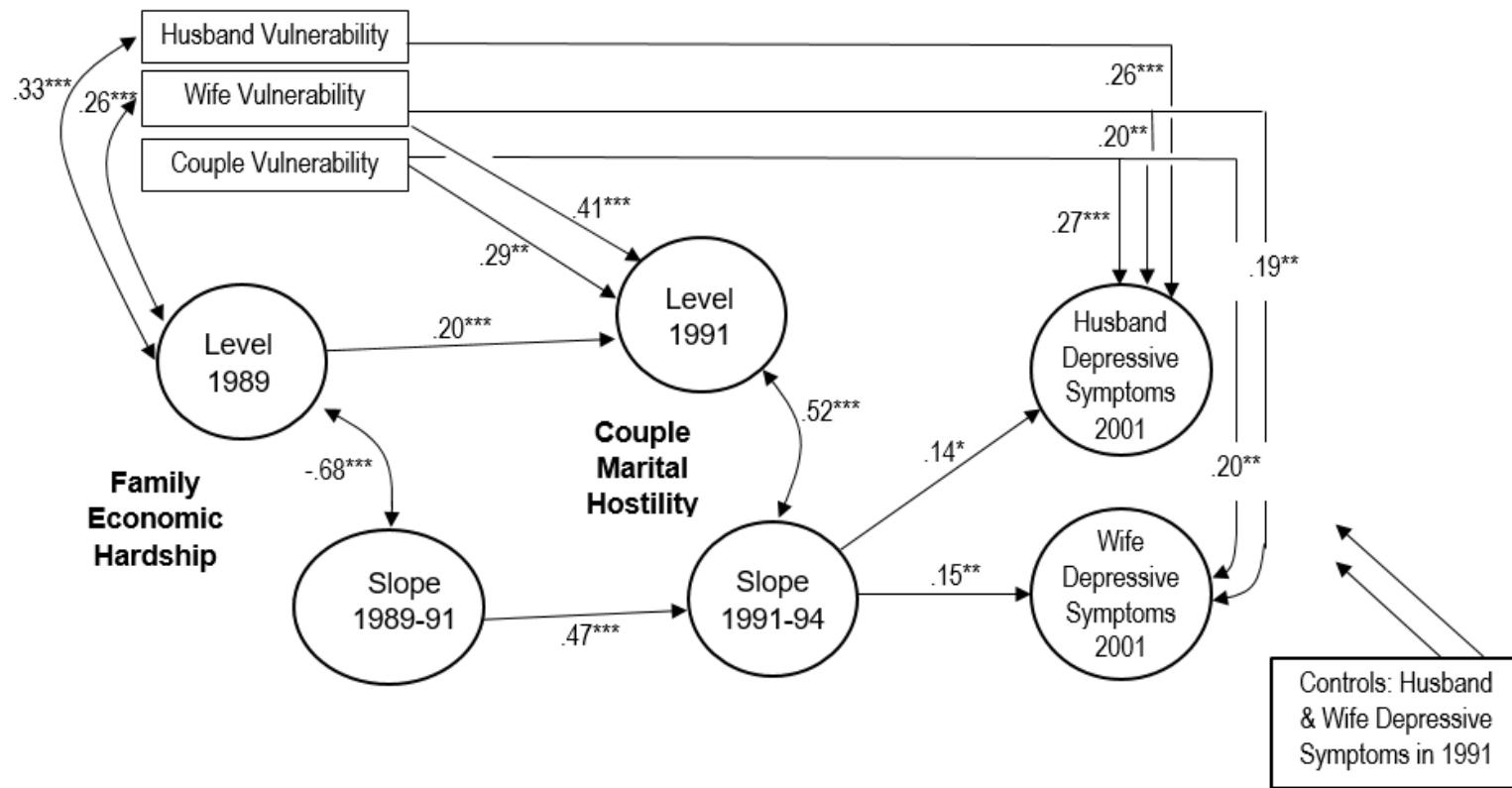


Figure 2. A SEM assessing personal and couple vulnerability, family economic hardship, marital hostility, and husbands' and wives' depressive symptoms.

Note: Only statistically significant paths are shown. Standardized coefficients are presented. The slope of economic hardship was significantly correlated with husband, wife, and couple vulnerability ($r = -.38$, $-.34$, and $.24$). These correlations are not shown in the figure.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.



Results

- Fit indices:
 - $\chi^2(df) = 190.79(72)$
 - CFI = .94
 - RMSEA = .07
- R-square statistics for depressive symptoms (2001)
 - 12.8% for husbands
 - 23.7% for wives
- Indirect effects
 - Change in economic hardship and depressive symptoms through change in marital quality
 - $a^*b = .07$ (husbands) and $a^*b = .07$ (wives)



The University of Georgia

Department of Human Development and Family Science

Moderation Results

- Mean split to compare couples with “high” and “low” neurotic vulnerability
 - Associations between economic hardship, marital hostility, and depressive symptoms separately
- A lack of effects for couples with low neurotic vulnerability
- Amplified effects for couples with high neurotic vulnerability



The University of Georgia

Department of Human Development and Family Science

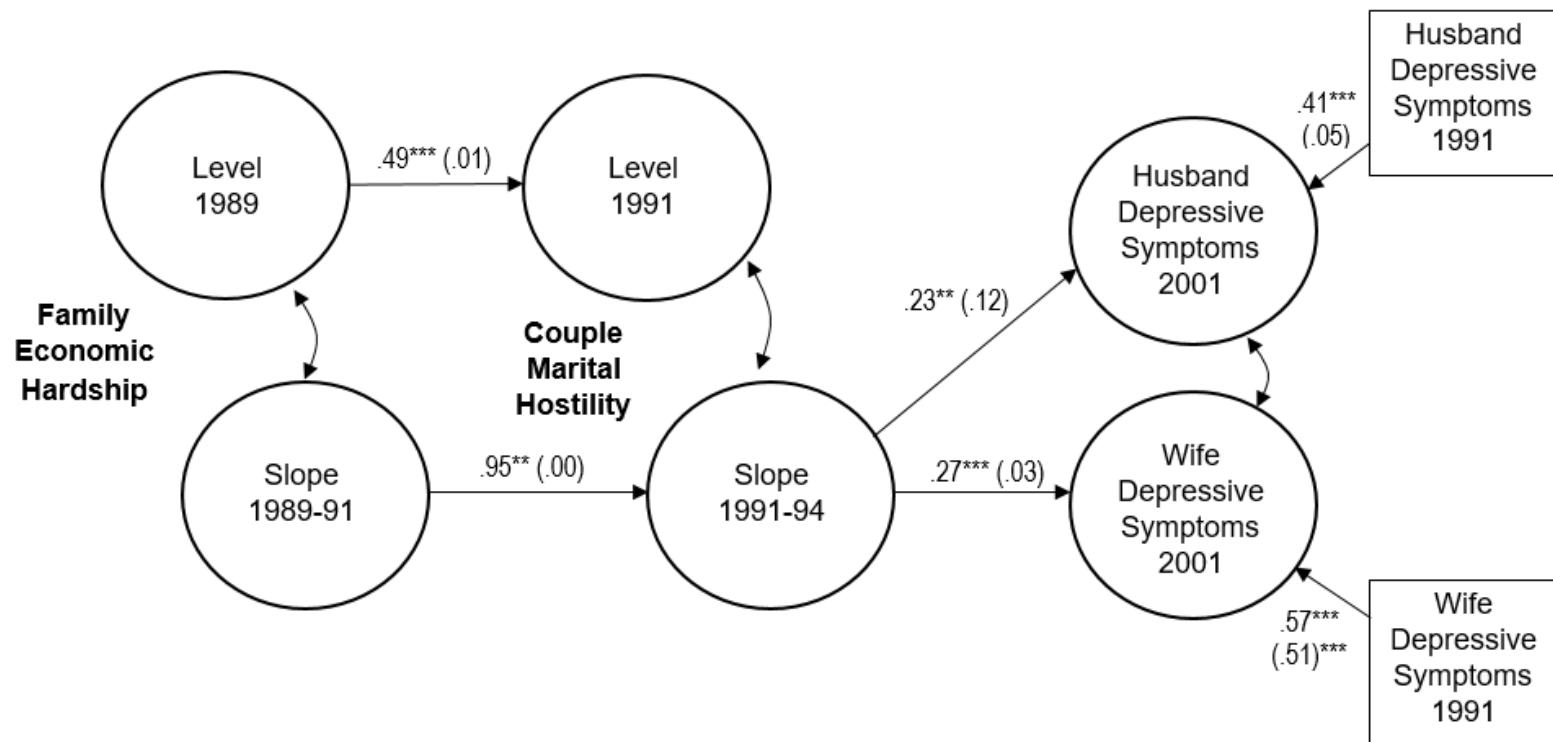


Figure 3. A SEM assessing the moderating role of couple-level vulnerability on the hypothesized associations.

Notes. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. Standardized coefficients are presented for the *high* vulnerability couples with coefficients for the *low* vulnerability couples in parentheses.



Findings

- Contributors to change in husbands' and wives' depressive symptoms:
 - Hostile marital behavior trajectories
 - Neurotic vulnerability
- Marital hostility trajectories link stressful experiences to changes in depressive symptoms
- Moderation by couple-level neurotic vulnerability



The University of Georgia

®

Department of Human Development and Family Science

Situating the Findings

- Comprehensive model over an extended period of time
- Unique characteristics of study sample
 - Enduring marriages
 - Couples in midlife
 - Under conditions of above average stressors



The University of Georgia

®

Department of Human Development and Family Science

Implications

- The *mental health impact* of adverse marital changes
- The role of not only individual enduring vulnerabilities, but the *combination* or product of partners' vulnerabilities (couple vulnerability)



The University of Georgia

Department of Human Development and Family Science

Thank You

Catherine W. O'Neal, Ph.D. is an Assistant Research Scientist in the Department of Human Development and Family Science at The University of Georgia (cwalker1@uga.edu).

This research is currently supported by a grant from the National Institute on Aging (AG043599, Kandauda A. S. Wickrama, PI).



The University of Georgia

Department of Human Development and Family Science

