

When the Going Gets Tough Couples Coping with Marital Conflict



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Marriage and the like...

- Marriage is an emotional experience!
- Individuals must deal with their own reactions as well as those of their partner (Carstensen et al., 1996).
- Distress and emotion transmit between members of a family unit (Bolger et al., 1989; Larson & Almeida, 1999).
- Demand/withdraw pattern (e.g., Watzlawick et al., 1967).
- Conflict resolution is key to emotional well-being (Carstensen et al., 1996).

Dyadic Coping

- Coping response of one partner takes into account stress signals of other partner (Bodenmann et al., 2006).
- Relationship-focused coping:
“A form of coping directed at maintaining and regulating relationships” during stressful events (DeLongis & O’Brien, 1990).
- Interpersonal dimensions of coping are key to understanding coping processes (O’Brien & DeLongis, 1996).
- But still unclear what makes a coping strategy effective.

Response of Others

- Negative responses to coping predicted reduced effort and effectiveness of coping (e.g., DeLongis et al., 1986).
- Positive responses to coping (from spouse) amplified benefits of rel'p-focused coping and attenuated negative effects of maladaptive coping strategies (Marin et al., 2007).
- Daily processes unknown, findings based on perception.
- How partners' coping responses interact is unknown.

Purpose of Current Study

- To investigate:

(1) the impact of husbands' coping response on wives' coping effectiveness.

(2) the impact of wives' coping response on husbands' coping effectiveness.

- Outcome of interest:
Negative affect.



Hypotheses

It was expected that...

1. Spouse's coping effectiveness (as determined by mood) would be significantly influenced by other spouse's use of dyadic coping responses (withdrawal, confrontation, compromise, empathy).
2. Negative responses from spouse would impair effectiveness of adaptive coping strategies and amplify harmful effects of maladaptive coping strategies.

Sample

- Taken from sample of couples living in stepfamily context, with at least one child from previous marriage.
- 75 cohabitating, heterosexual couples (N = 150).
- M age = 40 years (Range = 20 to 59 yrs).
- Canadian born (72%), others from US and England.
- M years living together = 4.6 (max = 12).
- M number of children in the stepfamily was 3.1.

Methods

- Daily diary (paper) study of couples.
- Followed for 7 consecutive days; 2x daily.
- Daily measures of interest:
 - AM and PM negative affect.
 - Interpersonal family stressors (e.g., marital conflict).
 - Perceived seriousness of stressors.
 - Coping responses (current focus on dyadic coping).

Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM)

- Multilevel/nested data structure, repeated measures.
- HLM – models both within- and between-subject variation.
- Random intercept model.
- Level-1: variables centered around mean of each individual's score across diary entries (Blackwell et al., 2006).
- Level-2: no additional variables entered; intercept takes on role of couple effect.

Generic Model

Level-1: Target's PM negative affect_{ti} =
W/i person variation

$$\begin{aligned} & \beta_{0i} \\ & + \beta_{1i}(\text{target's AM negative affect})_{ti} \\ & + \beta_{2i}(\text{target's perceived seriousness of stressor})_{ti} \\ & + \beta_{3i}(\text{target's coping response})_{ti} \\ & + \beta_{4i}(\text{spouse's coping response})_{ti} \\ & + \beta_{5i}(\text{target's response} \times \text{spouse's response})_{ti} \end{aligned}$$

Level-2: $\beta_{0i} = \gamma_0 + u_{0i}$
B/w person variation

$$\begin{aligned} & \beta_{1i} = \gamma_1 \\ & \beta_{2i} = \gamma_2 \\ & \text{etc.} \end{aligned}$$

Predicting Wife's Mood...

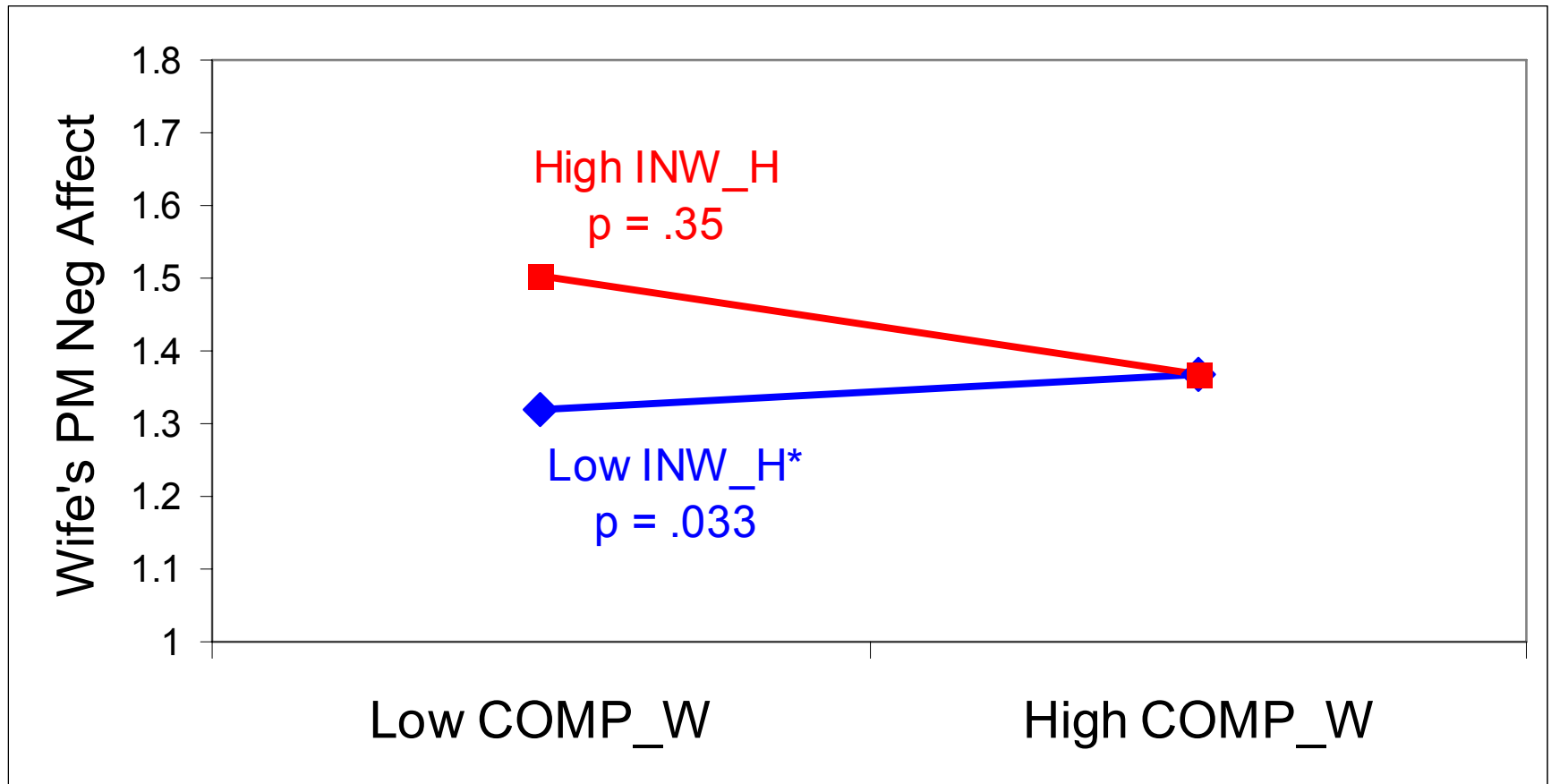
Her Compromise x His Withdrawal

Effect (person-centered)	Wife's PM Negative Affect	
	β	SE
Wife's AM Negative Affect	.08	.07
Wife's Seriousness of Stressor	.08**	.03
Wife's Compromise (COMP)	-.05	.05
Husband's Interpersonal Withdrawal (INW)	.20*	.09
Wife's COMP x Husband's INW	-.46*	.22

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

Predicting Wife's Mood...

Her Compromise x His Withdrawal



COMP = Compromise; INW = Interpersonal Withdrawal

Predicting Wife's Mood...

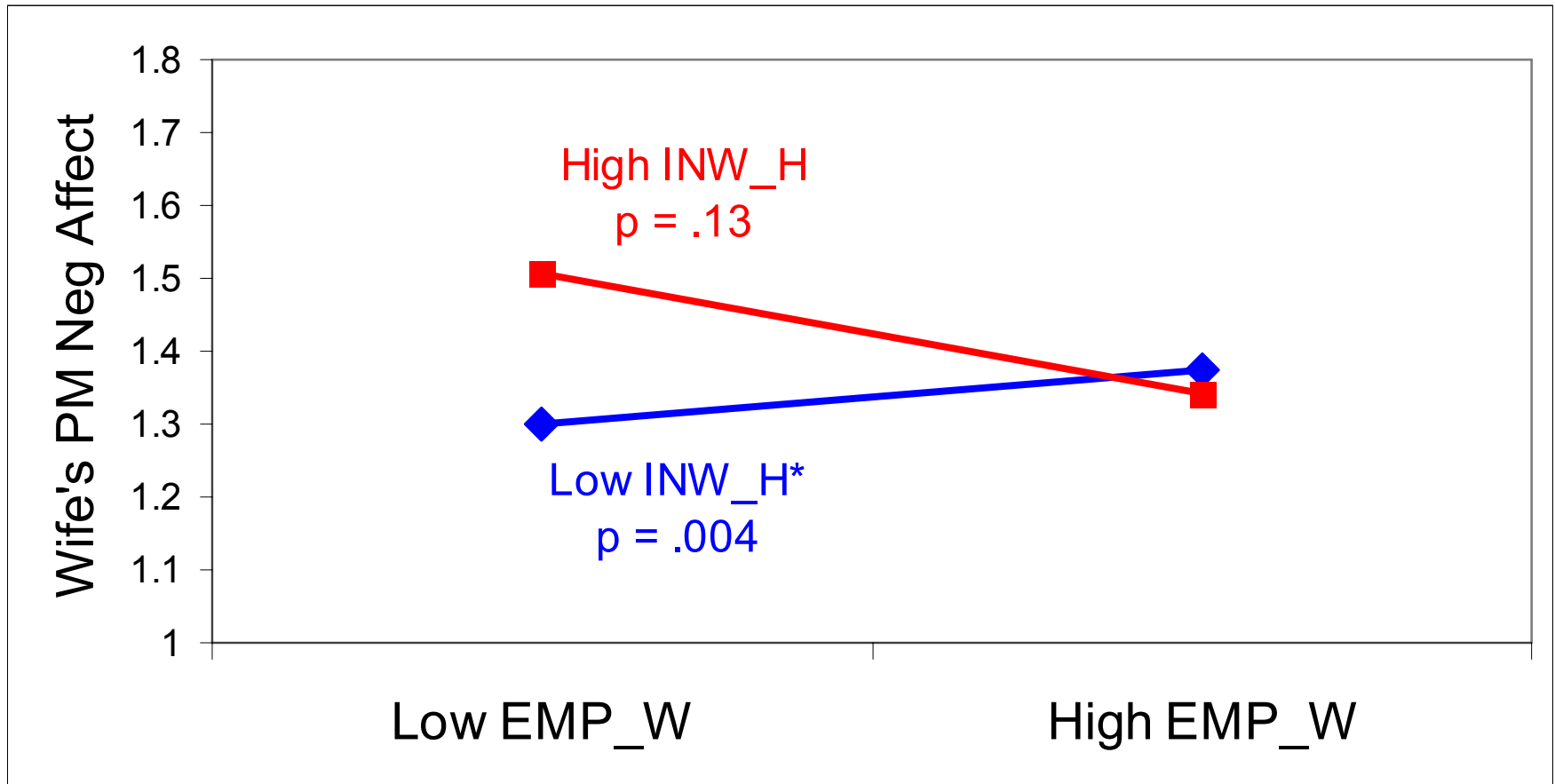
Her Empathy x His Withdrawal

Effect (person-centered)	Wife's PM Negative Affect	
	β	SE
Wife's AM Negative Affect	.08	.07
Wife's Seriousness of Stressor	.08**	.03
Wife's Empathy (EMP)	-.05	.05
Husband's Interpersonal Withdrawal (INW)	.19*	.09
Wife's EMP x Husband's INW	-.57**	.21

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Predicting Wife's Mood...

Her Empathy x His Withdrawal



EMP = Empathy; INW = Interpersonal Withdrawal

Predicting Wife's Mood...

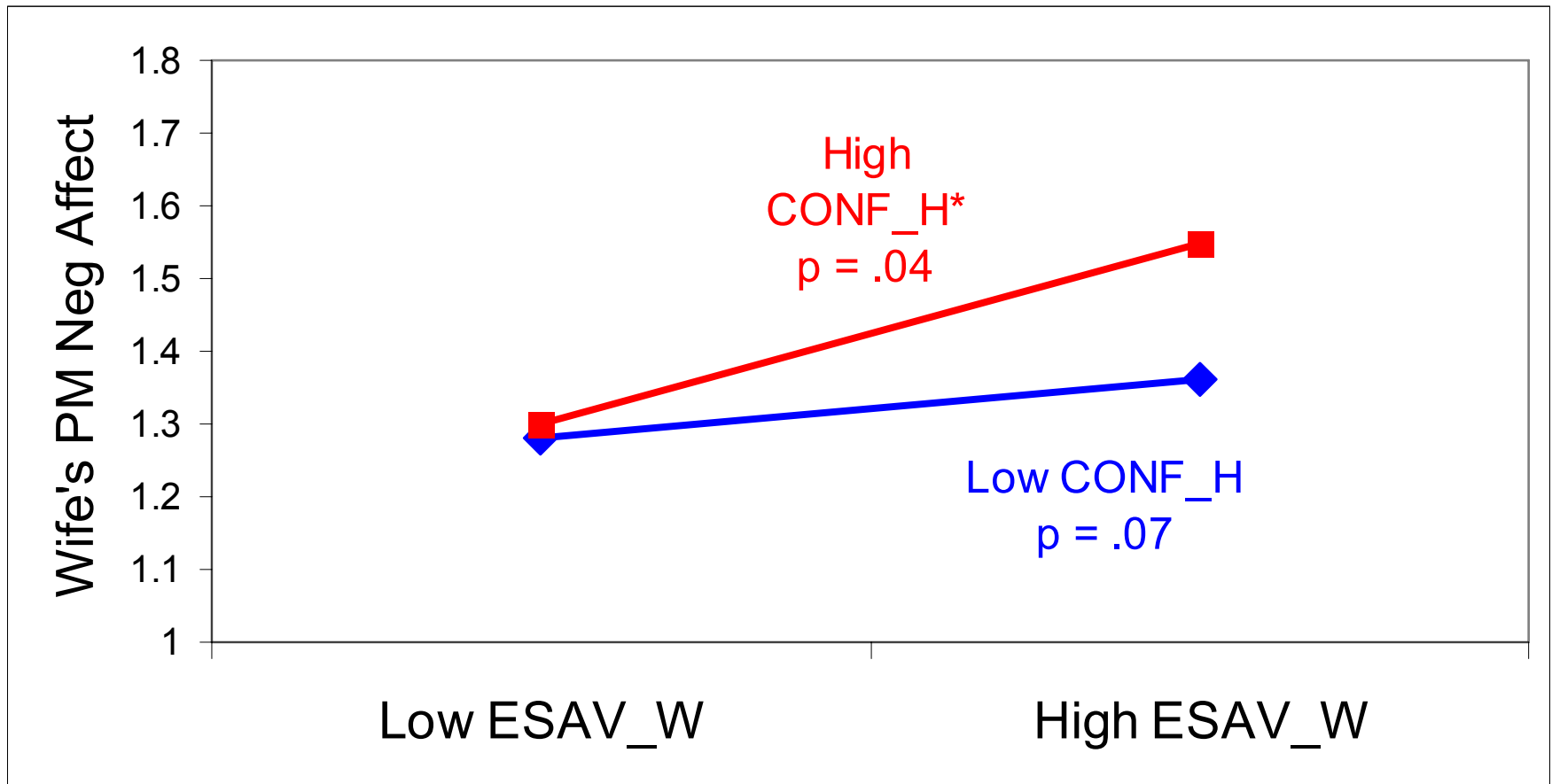
Her Avoidance x His Confrontation

Effect (person-centered)	Wife's PM Negative Affect	
	β	SE
Wife's AM Negative Affect	.01	.07
Wife's Seriousness of Stressor	.04	.03
Wife's Escape/Avoidance (ES/AV)	.24***	.06
Husband's Confrontation (CONF)	.09*	.04
Wife's ES/AV x Husband's CONF	.18*	.09

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

Predicting Wife's Mood...

Her Avoidance x His Confrontation



ES/AV = Escape/Avoidance; CONF = Confrontation

Interim Summary

Husband's Impact on Wife

- When she engages in interpersonal coping, her mood worsens if husband does NOT withdraw. But why?
- Suggests a wife-“attend” / husband-withdraw pattern may be adaptive for wives (re: daily outcomes).
- When she's avoiding the problem, her negative mood is amplified by the husband's confrontation.
- Suggests a husband-demand / wife-withdraw pattern is maladaptive for wives (re: daily outcomes).

Predicting Husband's Mood...

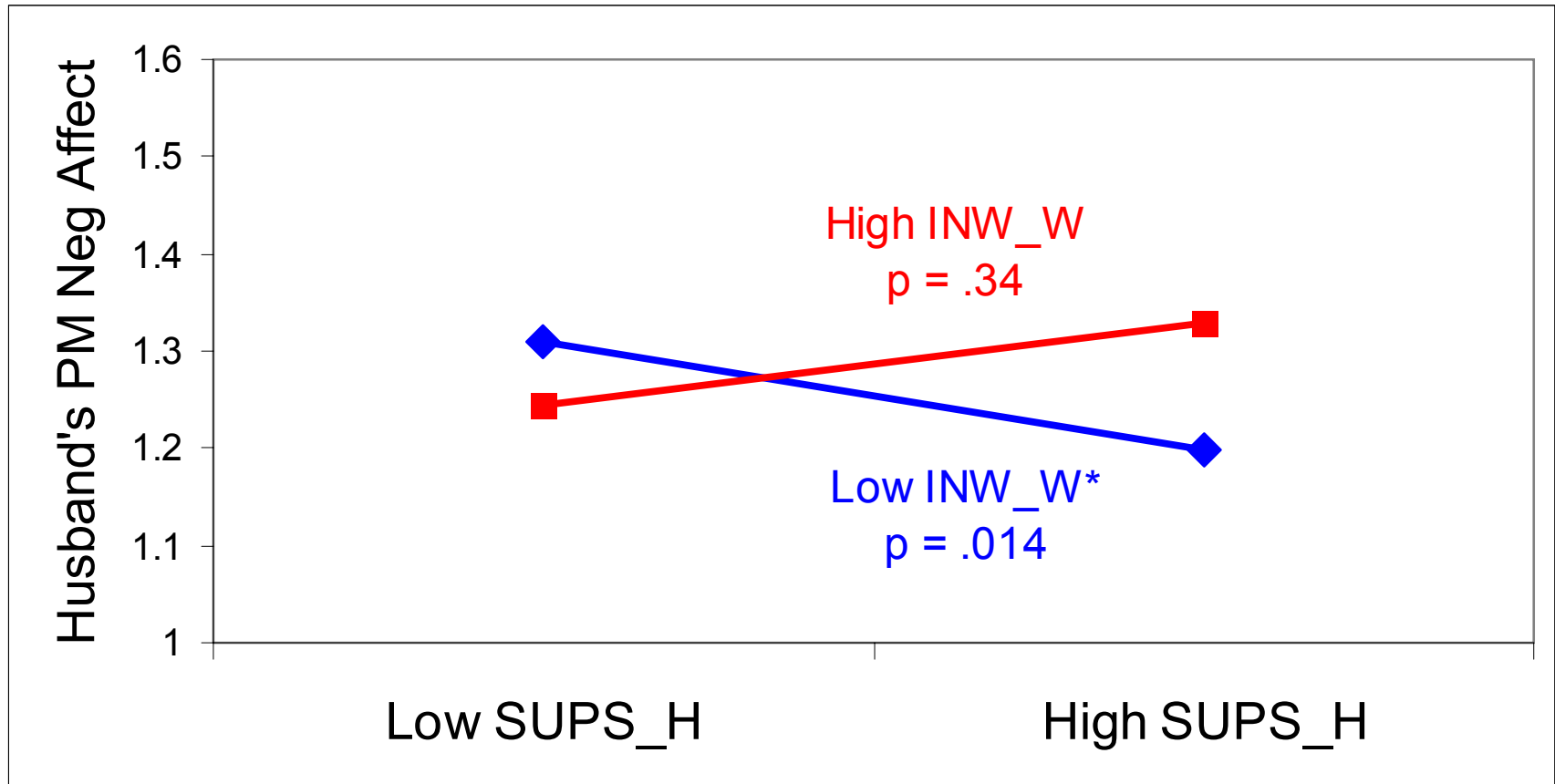
His Support-Seeking x Her Withdrawal

Effect (person-centered)	Husband's PM Negative Affect	
	β	SE
Husband's AM Negative Affect	.19**	.07
Husband's Seriousness of Stressor	.12***	.02
Husband's Support-Seeking (SUPS)	-.02	.05
Wife's Interpersonal Withdrawal (INW)	.05	.05
Husband's SUPS x Wife's INW	.47**	.17

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

Predicting Husband's Mood...

His Support-Seeking x Her Withdrawal



SUPS = Support-Seeking; INW = Interpersonal Withdrawal

Predicting Husband's Mood...

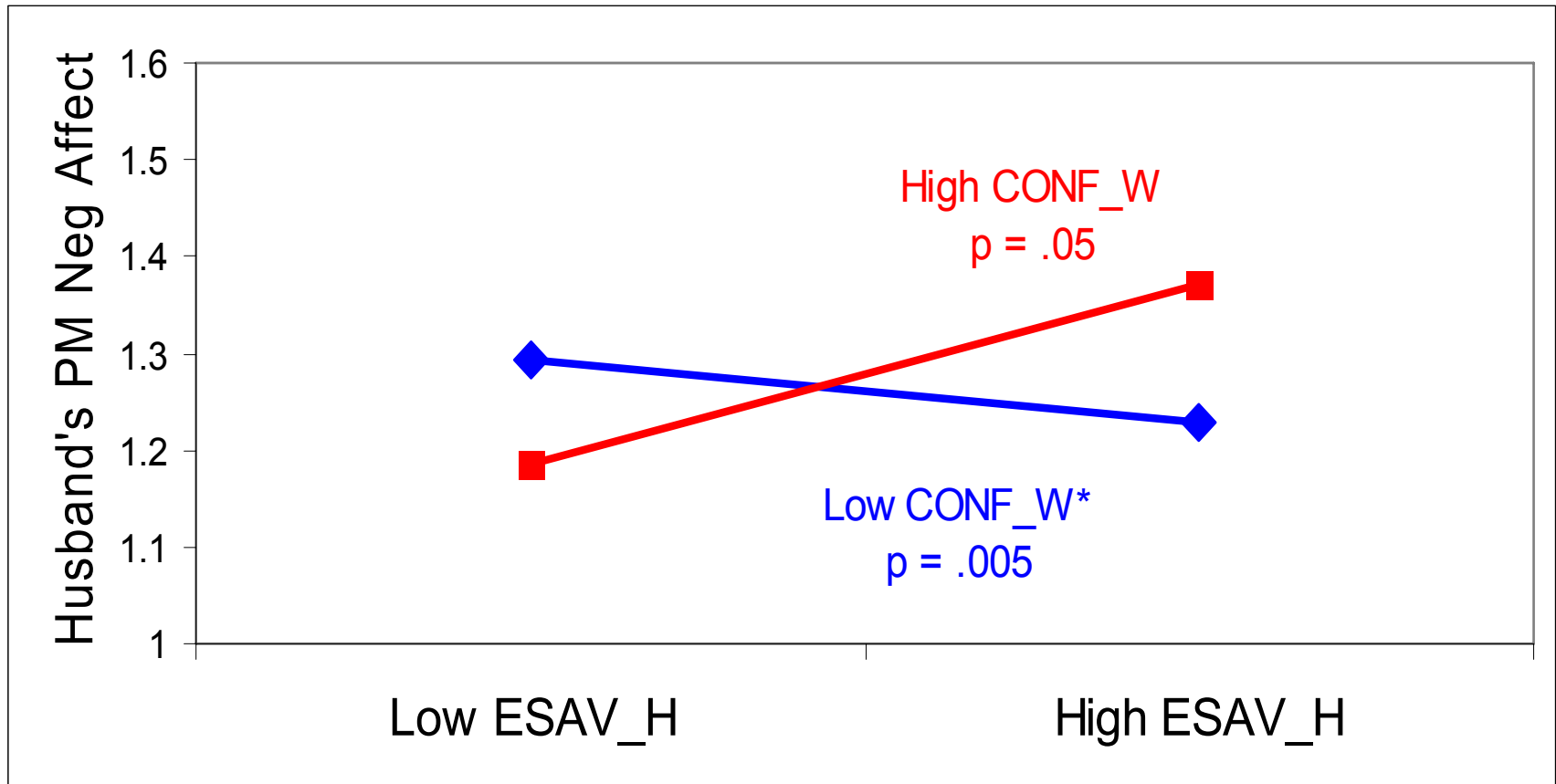
His Avoidance x Her Confrontation

Effect (person-centered)	Husband's PM Negative Affect	
	β	SE
Husband's AM Negative Affect	.18**	.07
Husband's Seriousness of Stressor	.09***	.02
Husband's Escape/Avoidance (ES/AV)	.10	.05
Wife's Confrontation (CONF)	.02	.03
Husband's ES/AV x Wife's CONF	.45**	.13

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

Predicting Husband's Mood...

His Avoidance x Her Confrontation



ES/AV = Escape/Avoidance; CONF = Confrontation

Interim Summary

Wife's Impact on Husband

- When he's seeking support, his affective outcomes improve as the wife withdraws less.
- When he's avoiding the problem, affective outcomes improve as she confronts less (and seem to worsen as she confronts more).
- Suggests a demand-withdraw pattern is maladaptive for husbands (re: daily outcomes).
- But, escape/avoidance can be effective for husbands.

Hypotheses...

1. Spouse's coping effectiveness would be significantly influenced by other spouse's use of dyadic coping methods.

Two dyadic coping strategies found to impact the other spouse's coping effectiveness: confrontation and interpersonal withdrawal (consistent across genders).

2. Negative responses from spouse would impair effectiveness of adaptive coping and amplify harmful effects of maladaptive coping.

Partially supported in 3 of 5 models.

Exceptions: Wife's dyadic coping improves mood when husband withdraws.

Conclusions

- What benefits one spouse does not necessarily benefit the other spouse.
 - Effects of other spouse's withdrawal.
 - Escape/avoidance.
- Although affected in different ways, husbands' and wives' coping responses were significantly influenced by their spouses' confrontation and interpersonal withdrawal.
- How the other person responds changes the effects of one's own coping.

Implications

- Context matters, especially the interpersonal context.
- Implications for demand/withdraw model.
- Clinical implications for couples therapy.



Future Directions

- Going beyond the stepfamily context.
- Observational studies – important piece of the puzzle. Studies that combine observation and time-sampling are needed.
- Role of perception of response vs. actual response – Which matters more? How do they fit together?