

Coparental Discord and Children's Behavior Problems: Children's Negative Family Representations as an Explanatory Mechanism

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INTRODUCTION

State of the Literature

- Coparenting is the ability of caregivers to coordinate with and support each other in their roles & responsibilities as parents (McHale & Rasmussen, 1998)
- Coparenting conflict is consistently linked with an increased risk for externalizing behaviors in children (McHale & Rasmussen, 1998; Schoppe, Mangelsdorf & Frosch, 2001)

Gap in the Literature

- Little is known about how or why coparenting discord is a unique predictor of child adjustment

Current Study

- Guided by Emotional Security Theory (EST), coparenting discord is proposed to engender in children negative representations of the family (Davies & Cummings, 1994)
- Insecure representations are proposed to in turn increase children's risk for the development of externalizing behaviors (Davies & Cummings, 1994)

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Hypotheses:

- The prospective association between coparental discord and child behavior problems two years later will be partially accounted for by children's negative family representations
- This association will remain robust even after including several other interrelated measures of family functioning

METHOD

Participants

- 243 families (mothers, mother's intimate partner, and child)
 - Average age of child at W1 = 4.6 years old
 - 56% of sample was female
- Ethnicity/Race:
 - 48% Black or African American
 - 43% White
 - 6% multiracial
 - 3% another race
- SES:
 - Median income: \$36,000 per year
 - Families receiving public assistance = 69%
 - Median education level of parents = HS diploma or GED
- Data were collected at two time points spaced two years apart

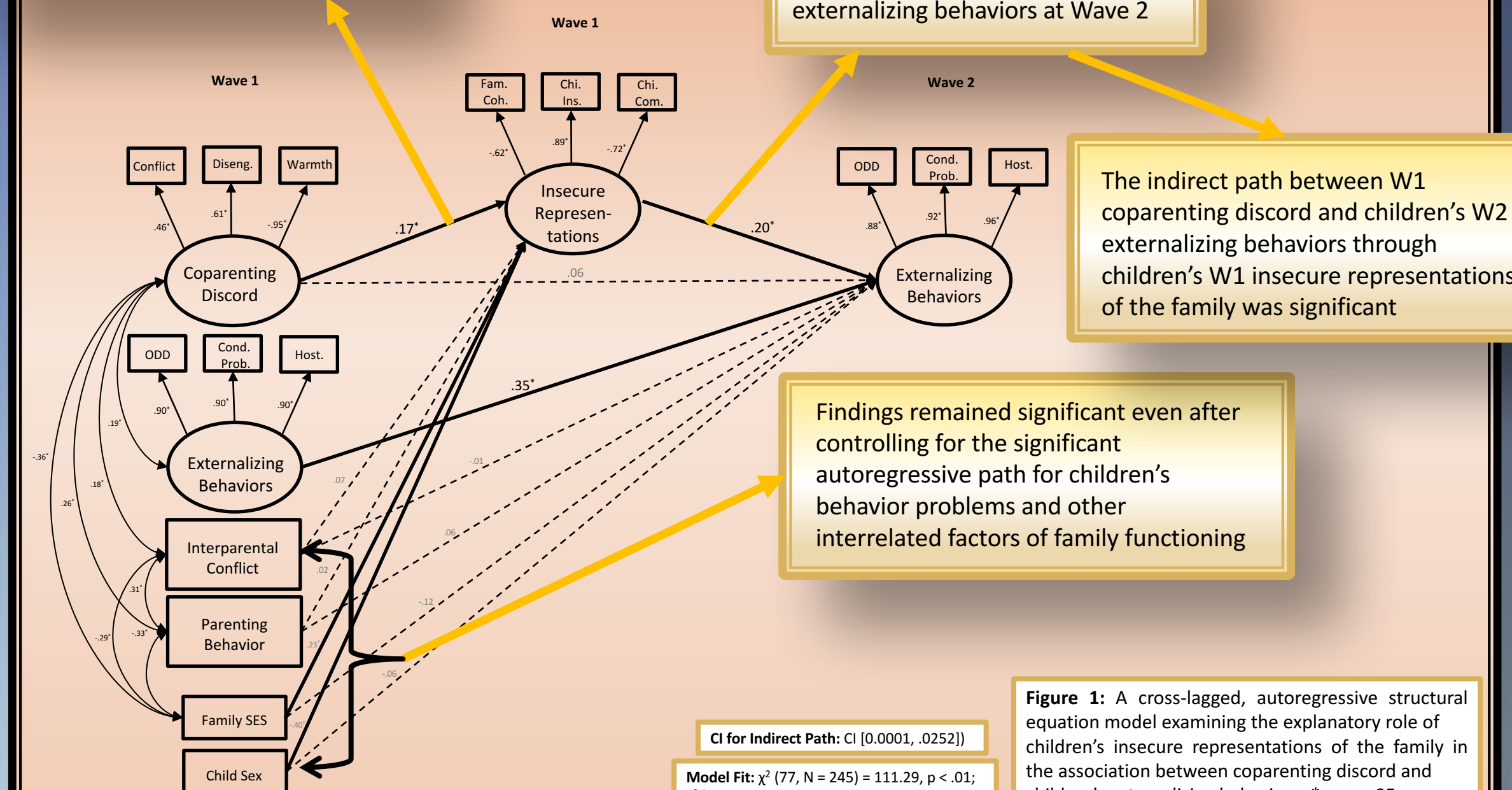
Measures

Construct	Waves	Type	Reporter	Description	Reliability
Coparenting Discord	1	Observational Assessment	Trained Coder	A triadic behavioral interaction capturing coparenting conflict, disengagement, and warmth where parents and child worked together to build a Lego house.	Interrater Reliabilities = .85 - .86
Children's Insecure Representations	1	Semi-structured Interview	Trained Coder	Child portrayals of insecurity and family difficulties in response to a story stem task (i.e. MacArthur Story Stem Battery) depicting challenges to different family subsystems.	Interrater Reliabilities = .95 - .97
Children's Externalizing Behaviors	1 & 2	Survey	Teacher	Child behaviors consistent with oppositional defiance, overt hostility, and conduct problems.	α s = .80 - .92
Interparental Conflict	1	Survey	Mother & Partner	Extent to which parents used psychologically and physically aggressive conflict tactics with one another.	α = .70
Parenting Behaviors	1	Survey	Mother & Partner	Parental endorsement of child-rearing strategies (i.e. neglect/ignoring, conditional approval, love withdrawal, power assertion, disgust/teasing) to common scenarios that depicted child experiences with success, failure, and transgression.	α = .76

RESULTS

Coparenting discord at W1 predicted higher levels of children's W1 insecure representations of the family

Children's negative representations, in turn predicted increases in their externalizing behaviors at Wave 2



The indirect path between W1 coparenting discord and children's W2 externalizing behaviors through children's W1 insecure representations of the family was significant

Findings remained significant even after controlling for the significant autoregressive path for children's behavior problems and other interrelated factors of family functioning

CI for Indirect Path: CI [0.0001, .0252]
 Model Fit: $\chi^2(77, N = 245) = 111.29, p < .01$
 χ^2/df ratio = 1.45, CFI = .98, and RMSEA = .04

Figure 1: A cross-lagged, autoregressive structural equation model examining the explanatory role of children's insecure representations of the family in the association between coparenting discord and children's externalizing behaviors. * = $p < .05$

CONCLUSIONS

What did we find?

- Children's insecure representations of the family partially accounted for the association between coparenting discord and children's behavior problems

Why might coparental discord undermine child security?

- Coparenting → Insecure Representations
 - Conflict that directly concerns the child (i.e. coparenting conflict) may be more threatening to them than conflict that does not concern them (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Grych & Fincham, 1993)
- Coparenting discord signals two things to children:
 - Parents are unable to coordinate to reliably provide the child with safety and security in the family unit
 - Parents are unable to encapsulate their conflict to the interparental subsystem (Grych & Fincham, 1990)

Why might insecure representations of the family predict children's behavior problems in school?

- When encountering novel situations outside the home, children rely on their previously formed internal representations of the family to guide their processing of and responses to novel interpersonal situations (Sturge-Apple et al., 2008)
 - When representations are insecure, children tend to more negatively process new social information (Bascoe et al., 2009)

Future Directions

- The current study is a first step in identifying linking mechanisms in the association between coparenting discord and child behavior problems
 - Future studies should examine other child mechanisms at work in this association

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