Caregiver Relationship Instability and Children's Externalizing Symptoms: Identifying Child Response Processes as Mediators

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INTRODUCTION

- Caregiver relationship instability is a unique predictor of externalizing problems (Ackerman et al., 2002)
- Unclear why caregiver relationship instability is a unique predictor (Ackerman et al., 2002; Hartman et al., 2018)
- Unpredictable family contexts organize responses for future threat and impoverishment (Belsky et al., 2012; Ellis et al., 2017)
- These responses intensify over time into externalizing symptoms (Belsky et al., 2012; Ellis et al., 2017)

HYPOTHESES

- Caregiver relationship instability magnifies vulnerability to externalizing problems by increasing:
  1) dominant interpersonal styles for responding to peer challenges
  2) low persistence in completing challenging tasks
  3) negative family representations

METHOD

Participants
- 243 children and their families
  - 56% girls
  - 44% boys
  - M age at W1 = 4.6 years
- Ethnicity/Race
  - 48% African-American
  - 43% White
  - 9% Multi-racial or Other
  - 16% Latino
- Socio-economic Status
  - Median income: $36,000
  - 69% received public assistance
  - Median parental education: High school diploma or equivalent
- Data collected at three annual time points

Constructs: Method Reporter Waves Measures Description Reliability

RESULTS

- Each response process explained the link between caregiver relationship instability and externalizing symptoms
- According to life history theory, these response processes may actually be adaptive (Belsky et al., 2012; Ellis et al., 2012)
- Negative family representations may represent encoding and internalization of threats (Ellis et al., 2012)
- Fast life history strategies may optimize children’s survival by:
  1) regulating social standing and access to resources
  2) shifting perspectives toward a short-term “response ready” strategy
  3) Reduction in the broadening of negative representations

CONCLUSIONS

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Figure 1. A simplified illustration of a latent difference score analysis of three mediators of the prospective association between caregiver relationship instability and change in youth externalizing symptoms.

Note: W1 = Wave 1; W2 = Wave 2; W3 = Wave 3; p < .05. Bolded, blue lines denote hypothesized, significant paths and nonbolded lines signify estimated paths.