

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

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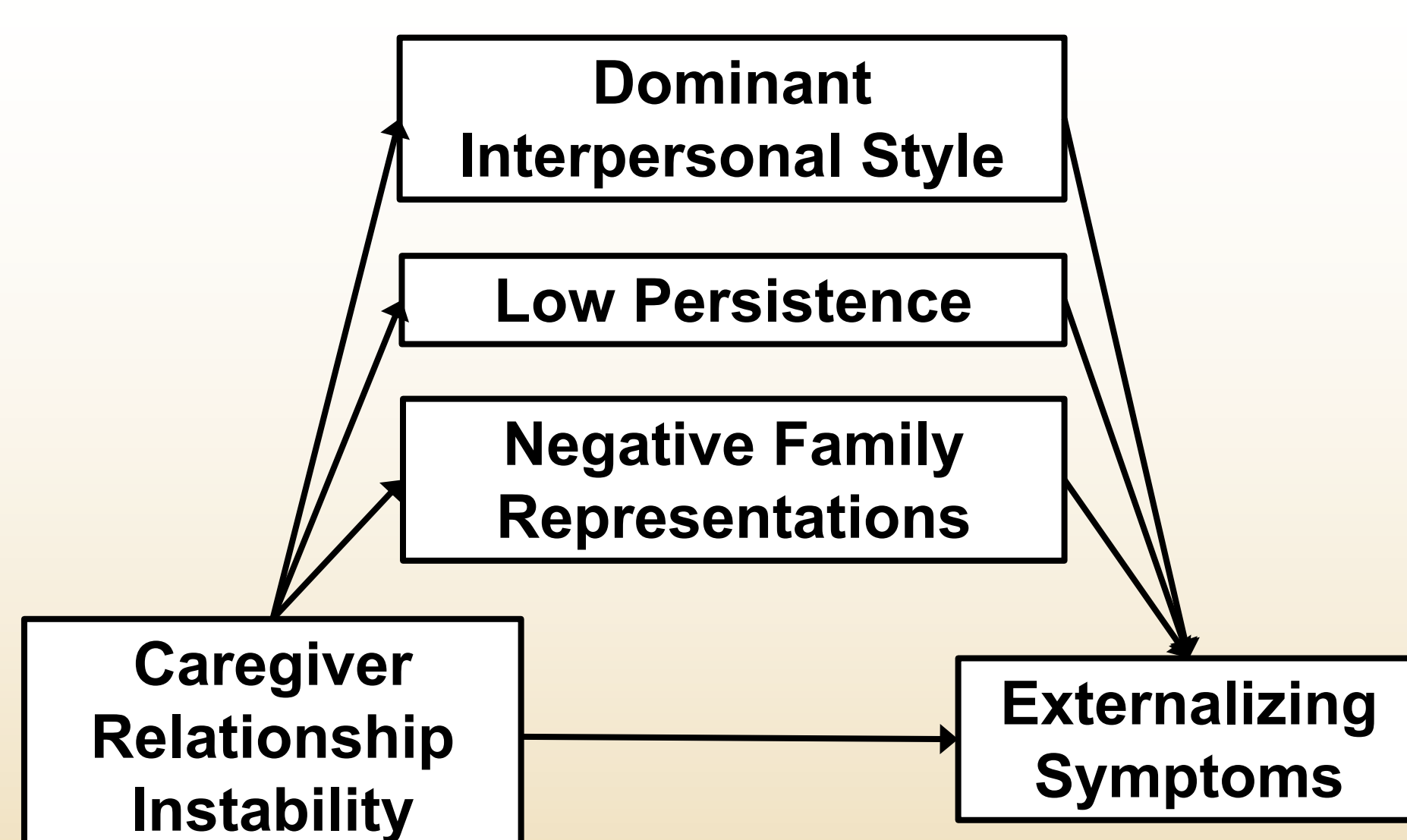
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INTRODUCTION

- 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



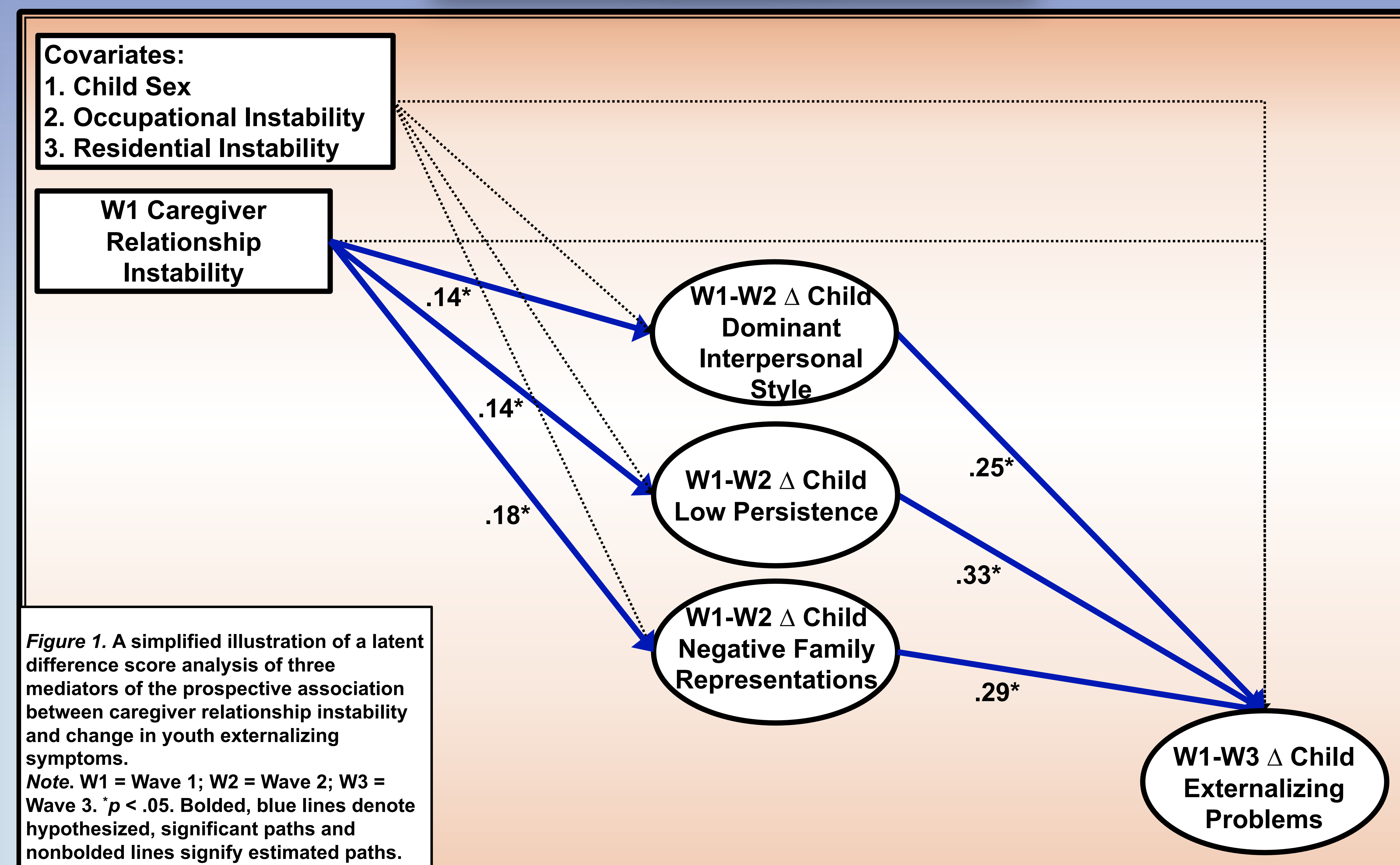
METHOD

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

Construct	Method	Reporter	Waves	Measures Description	Reliability
Family Instability	Survey	Maternal Report	1	1) <i>Caregiver Relationship Instability</i> : frequency of caregiver relationship changes. 2) <i>Residential Instability</i> : frequency of residential changes. 3) <i>Occupational Instability</i> : frequency of parental job loss.	NA
Dominant Interpersonal Style	Semi-structured Interview	Trained Coder	1 & 2	Children's endorsement of domineering and coercive strategies for coping with challenging peer events.	Interrater reliability = .71 and .82
Low Persistence	Observation	Observation	1 & 2	Children's degree of persistence on a challenging cognitive task requiring sustained attention and effort.	NA
Negative Family Representations	Semi-structured Interview	Trained Coder	1 & 2	Children's portrayals of their family as discordant and threatening.	Interrater reliability range = .90 - .97
Externalizing Problems	Survey; Observation	Maternal, Teacher, and Experimenter Report	1 & 3	Child oppositional defiant, conduct problem, hostile, relationally aggressive, and ADHD behaviors.	$\alpha_s = .87 - .96$

RESULTS



CONCLUSIONS

- 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 (Ellis et al., 2012)

- These response processes have important translational implications:
 - 1) Development of school programs to promote peer relationships
 - 2) Development of attention and inhibitory control trainings
 - 3) Reduction in the broadening of negative representations

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