Associations among personality, family interactions, and adolescent externalizing in adoptive and non-adoptive families

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Introduction

The Present Study

The present study tested a theoretical process model that proposed associations among adolescent and parent personality, parent and adolescent communication, adolescent conflict, and adolescent externalizing behavior in adoptive and non-adoptive families (see proposed conceptual process model, Figure 1). To account for different parent-adolescent theoretical family processes, separate mother-adolescent and father-adolescent dyadic models were tested (see Figure 2). Testing the Figure 2 model was an important step toward understanding a small but noteworthy difference in and risk for externalizing behaviors for adopted adolescents (Grotevant, Rueter, von Korff, & Gonzales, 2011). Although some variation in externalizing behavior may be due to prenatal or preplacement factors (Grotevant et al., 2006) or a small number of cases (Brand & Brinich, 1999), we know relatively little about what accounts for this notable difference.

Theoretical Frameworks

- Goodness of fit theory (Lerner, 1993; Thomas & Chess, 1977)
- Person-environment transactional theory (Caspi et al., 1987; 1988; Scarr & McCartney, 1983)
- Family Communications Patterns Theory (FCPT; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a, 2000b, 2004, 2006)
- Actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny & Cook, 1999; Kenny et al., 2006; Kenny & Ledermann, 2010)

Participants

Data for this study were from the Sibling Interaction and Behavior Study (SIBS; McGue et al., 2007). Participating families at intake (N = 617) had at least one parent and two adolescent siblings (M = 14.9 years, SD = 1.9). The present study used data from the mothers (M = 45.56, SD = 4.23), fathers (M = 48.23, SD = 4.42), elder (M = 16.14, SD = 1.5), and younger sibling (M = 13.8, SD = 1.6). In 384 (308) families, the older (younger) sibling was adopted (International: n = 253 (208), 67% (63%) Asian). In 231 (208) families, the elder (younger) sibling was the biological offspring of both parents. Two adoptive families were removed from the sample due to ineligibility resulting in a final sample of 615 families.

Measures

• Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (MPQ; Tellegen & Waller, 2008) – mother and father self-reported Aggression and Alienation scales
• Personality Booklet – Youth Abbreviated (PBYA; Tellegen & Waller, 2008) – adolescent reported Aggression and Alienation scales
• 4-point scale (1 = definitely false to 4 = definitely true) – high scores reflect high levels

Results

Mother-Adolescent Model

- Adolescent Externalizing Behaviors
  - Delinquent Behavior Inventory (DBI; Gibson, 1967) – adolescent self-reported
  - Diagnostic Interview for Children & Adolescents – Revised (DICA-R; Walser, Reich, Herjanic, Jung, & Amado, 1987) – adolescent or mother reported
  - ADHD (k = .77), ODD (k = .71), CD (k = .81), symptom counts
  - In-class behavior checklist adapted from Conners’ Teacher Rating Scale (Conners, 1969) and Rutter Child Scale B (Rutter, 1967) – summed teacher responses (α = .97)

Adoption status: 1 = adopted, 2 = not adopted

Father-Adolescent Model

- Family Interactions
  - Assessed using trained observers’ global ratings of dyadic (e.g. adolescent to mother, father to adolescent, etc.) family interaction tasks from the Sibling Interaction and Behavior Rating Scales (SIBS; adapted from the Iowa Family Interaction Scales, Melby & Conger, 2001). All SIBS are based on the following scale: 1 = not at all characteristic to 9 = mainly characteristic.
  - Communication (conceptualized as conversation-orientated behavior): factor scores of the Warmth (ICCs: .37 to .72), Listening Responsiveness (ICCs: .34 to .83), and Communication (ICCs: .60 to .75) scales
  - Conflict: observed scores of Hostility (ICCs: .71 to .73) and Angry/Coercion (ICCs: .65 to .87) scales

Discussion

• Findings underscore the complexity of adoptive family processes that contributed to adopted adolescent externalizing behaviors.
• Conceptual process alone revealed a differential parent involvement pattern and explained substantial variance in adolescent externalizing behaviors.
  - First study to suggest a differential parent involvement pattern in adoptive family processes.
  b) Full support for the conceptual process was not found for father-adolescent model.
• With the exception of the statistically significant negative association between mother Conversation and adolescent conflict, all associations were in the expected direction – suggesting that the overall family process mostly operated as the theoretical framework surmised and, in one case (FCPT), strengthened it.
  - This association suggestive of a double bind (defined as complex, paradoxical communicative dilemma; Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956).

Adoption Status

- Contributed differently (beyond the proposed process) based on parent-adolescent subsystem.
  - With respect to the overall process...
  a) …adolescent externalizing behavior was salient for adopted adolescent-mother (but not father) dyads (consistent with previous research); accounted for small increase in explained variance.
  b) …adolescent Conversation and adolescent Conversation were salient for adopted adolescent father dyads.

Future Directions

• Future work should continue to uncover explanatory family processes that help explain the small but noteworthy risk for adopted adolescent externalizing behaviors.
• Present study was cross sectional; future investigations should establish direction of effects.