Associations among personality, family interactions, & adolescent externalizing in adoptive & 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, Rutter, von Korff, & Gonzales, 2011). Although some variation in externalizing behavior may be due to prenatal or preplacement factors (Grotevant et al., 2006) or to 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., 1988; Scar & McCartney, 1963)
- Actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny & Cook, 1999; Kenny et al., 2006, Kenny & Lademann, 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 = 16.9 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 age = 13.8, SD = 1.6). In 384 (308) families, the elder (younger) sibling was adopted (International: n = 235 (208), 67% (85%) 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

Personality Traits
- MMPI-2 (Hackett & Butcher, 1989)
- Revised Diagnostic Interview for Children & Adolescents – Revised (DICA-R; Welner, Reich, Herjanic, Jung, & Amado, 1987)
- Parent and adolescent 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 = .87)

Results

Adolescent Externalizing Behaviors
- Delinquency Behavior Inventory (DBI; Gibson, 1967) – adolescent self-reported
- Diagnostic Interview for Children & Adolescents – Revised (DICA-R; Welner, Reich, Herjanic, Jung, & Amado, 1987) – adolescent or mother reported
- Hostility (ICC: .77), Listening Responsiveness (ICCs: .34 to .63), Communication (ICCs: .60 to .75) scales

Discussion

• Findings underscore the complexity of adolescent 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.
  a) Full support for mother-adolescent model consistent with general population research suggesting high mother involvement (Gryczkowski, Jordan, & Merc, 2010; Harris & Morgan, 1991; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Offenbach, 2006).
  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 Communication 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.