Contributions of Dyadic Traits and Conflict to Adopted Adolescent Externalizing

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Introduction
Given that 1.5 million (approximately 2%) of all United States children are adopted (Nickman et al., 2005) and empirical evidence that suggests that adopted adolescents may be at increased risk for externalizing behaviors (Keyes, Sharma, Iacono, & McGue, 2008), there is a critical need to understand adopted adolescent adjustment. Researchers have recently suggested moving beyond describing this risk to focusing on explaining processes that contribute to it (Palacios, 2009).

Participants
Present study used cross-sectional data from mothers (M age = 45.56, SD = 4.23), fathers (M age = 48.23, SD = 4.42), and the elder (M age = 16.14, SD = 1.5) of two adolescent siblings from 616 families at intake from the Sibling Interaction and Behavior Study (SIBS; McGue et al., 2007).

One adolescent deemed ineligible (due to a biological relation to other adopted sibling) removed from the sample (Final N = 616 families).

Theoretical Frameworks
- Person-environment transactional theory (Caspi et al., 1987, 1988)
- Goodness of fit theory (Leuner, 1993; Thomas & Chess, 1977)

Method
- Adolescent Externalizing – measured by (a) Delinquent Behavior Inventory (DBI) (Gibson, 1967) (α = .89), (b) the Diagnostic Interview for Children and Adolescents – Revised (DICA-R) (Welner et al., 1987) – adolescent or mother-reported summed symptom counts of ADHD, CD, and ODD (M = 5.05, SD = 5.74), and (c) Teacher ratings – 67-item behavior checklist adapted from Conner’s Teacher Rating Scale (Conner, 1969) and the Rutter Child Scale B (Rutter, 1967), summed responses summed (α = .97, Spearman-Brown interteacher reliability = .82).
- Adolescent Conflictual Behavior – measured by (a) Trained observers’ ratings from the Sibling Interaction and Behavior Rating Scales, adapted from the Iowa Family Interaction Rating Scales (IFIRS; Melby et al., 1998) Interclass correlations (ICC) ranged from .65 to .73.
- Parent-Adolescent Adaptive Traits – defined as shared parent-adolescent traits hypothesized to be adaptive and therefore beneficial to family and adolescent functioning. The traits assessed included mother, father, and adolescent Negative Emotionality (a higher order scale) and its three lower order dimensions (Aggression, Alienation, and Stress Reactivity). All traits were assessed using the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (MPQ; Tellegen & Waller, 2008) or the Personality Booklet – Youth Abbreviated (PBYA; Tellegen & Waller, 2008).

Results
Step 1 Findings: Age and Gender
- Explained a statistically significant amount of variance in Adolescent Externalizing across trait models.

Step 2 Findings: Variance Beyond Age and Gender
- All trait models had statistically significant increases in $R^2$ for Aggression model
  - Substantial 28% increase in $R^2$ ($t = 9.79, p < .01$) for Adolescent Externalizing
  - Small (.05%) increase in $R^2$ ($t = 2.46, p < .01$) for adolescent conflict
  - Only model with support for an indirect effect of aggressive traits on externalizing ($β = -.06, t = -3.37, p < .01$)

Step 3 Findings: Adoption Status
- No increases in explained variance for adolescent externalizing for any trait models
- Similar 2% increases in $R^2$ for Adolescent Conflict across trait models
- Support for an indirect effect of adoption status on externalizing through conflict in all trait models

Discussion
- Findings support a parent-child traits or adoption status initiated family conflict-mediated process that contributes to externalizing problems.
- Findings underscore the salience of adolescent conflict in adopted families. We found conflict-mediated relationships between parent-adolescent aggressive traits and externalizing, and adoption status and externalizing.
- Adopted adolescents’ identity challenges (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2008) may help explain the salience of conflict in adopted families. For example, navigating identity challenges may create internal turmoil that is perhaps manifested by adolescent conflict toward an adoptive parent (Lichtwarck-Aschoff, van Geert, Bosma, & Kunnen, 2008), which in turn may contribute to externalizing behaviors.
- The lower order parent-adolescent aggression trait was found to be the most salient predictor of adolescent conflict and externalizing.
- Our findings provide support for the lower order aggression trait in our process.
- Findings suggest that certain combinations of aggressive parent-adolescent traits may influence adolescent externalizing outcomes and theologically, may contribute to poor adaptation.
- Findings go beyond previous research by suggesting that parent and child traits together contribute to our family process that seeks explain externalizing behaviors.

Limitations
- Present study used an adolescent sample; it is unknown if this process operates in families with younger or older children.
- Generalizability is limited to adopted adolescents placed for adoption prior to two years of age.
- Future research should include adoptive families with more varied socioeconomic, regional, ethnic, racial, and placement backgrounds.

Future Directions
Future longitudinal research with appropriate time intervals should test reciprocal effects. Future research should also test for the salience of dyadic traits over individual ones by demonstrating that the former are stronger predictors of adolescent behavior than either parent or child traits alone.