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An actor-partner interdependence analysis of cognitive flexibility and indicators of social adjustment among mother-child dyads

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ABSTRACT

Social adjustment is a critical aspect of a highly satisfying and quality life. The goal of this study was to analyze the relationship between cognitive flexibility and three indicators of social adjustment (i.e., social skills, social support, and loneliness) among mother-child dyads. Actor-partner interdependence models were conducted on self-reported indicators of cognitive flexibility, social skills, social support, and loneliness from 146 mother – child dyad (N = 292). The results showed that one's own cognitive flexibility predicted higher social skills and social support, as well as lower levels of loneliness for both mothers and adult children. Partner effects also revealed that child cognitive flexibility predicted higher levels of social support for mothers. The theoretical and practical implications of these results are discussed in detail.

1. Introduction

Properly managing and deriving satisfaction from social life is fundamental for overall well-being. Individuals who are socially skilled and perceive high levels of social support experience high levels of psychological health (Segrin, McNelis, & Swiatkowski, 2016), less sexual risk (Curran et al., 2016), and less behavioral problems (Sun, Guan, Qin, Zhang, & Fan, 2013). Socially competent individuals also have highly satisfying personal relationships, greater life satisfaction, and lower risk of chronic health condition such as cardiovascular disease and high blood pressure (Umberson & Montez, 2010). On the other hand, low social integration is linked to serious health risks including higher mortality rates, psychological problems, and suicide attempts (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Umberson & Montez, 2010).

Numerous studies suggest that psychological factors such as depressive symptoms and anxiety predict social adjustment outcomes (O'Toole, Hougaard, & Mennin, 2013; Segrin, 2000). However, less research has examined the link between cognitive flexibility and social adjustment. Martin, Anderson, and Thweatt (1998) conceptualize cognitive flexibility as "a person's (a) awareness that in any given situation there are options and alternatives available, (b) willingness to be flexible and adapt to the situation, and (c) self-efficacy in being flexible. (p. 532)" Cognitive flexibility assesses an individual's overall ability to adapt to their social situation in an appropriate and effective way (Martin et al., 1998). Thus, it appears that cognitive flexibility is a particularly relevant psychological factor to consider in social adjustment research.

Given that social adjustment is critical to quality of life, the aim of this investigation was to understand how cognitive flexibility relates to social outcomes among mother-child dyads. The family system is a particularly relevant context for examining social adjustment. Family members tend to be highly interdependent, meaning that the thoughts, actions, and behaviors of one family member likely influence others (White & Klein, 2008). Because family members are interdependent, this study also explored the link between one family member's cognitive flexibility and another member's social adjustment (i.e., the association between mother cognitive flexibility and child social skills). The following paragraphs demonstrate how one's own and a family member's cognitive flexibility can relate to three indicators of social adjustment (social skills, social support, and loneliness).

1.1. Cognitive flexibility and social skills

A major aspect of social adjustment is *social skills*, which can be defined generally as the ability and motivation to communicate appropriately and effectively with others (Segrin, 1992). Cognitive flexibility is a mental state wherein individuals can identify the behaviors that best fit their social situation. Martin and Rubin (1995) showed that cognitively flexible individuals were high self-monitors, meaning they could evaluate their behaviors during interactions. Cognitive flexibility can increase one's ability to understand and adapt to cultural, situational, and relational norms when communicating with others. This suggests that cognitively flexible individuals can consciously choose behaviors that lead to positive interactions. For example, Curran and Andersen (2017) reported that cognitive flexibility positively predicted caring communication from mothers. In addition to increased

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positivity, cognitively flexible individuals are better able to manage complex interactions, such as conflict. Martin et al.'s (1998) findings showed that cognitive flexibility is related to higher levels of tolerance for disagreement and argumentativeness and lower levels of verbal aggressiveness. Thus, it seems that increased cognitive flexibility should relate to higher levels of social skills.

This study is also interested in partner reports of cognitive flexibility as predictors of social skills (e.g., mother cognitive flexibility predicting child social skills). Curran and Andersen (2017) showed that maternal cognitive flexibility predicted outcomes in adult children. Their results revealed a significant association between maternal cognitive flexibility and both child perceptions of maternal care and child cognitive flexibility. These findings indicate that children should have higher social skills when their mothers are cognitively flexible. One of the ways children learn social behaviors is through observing their parents (Bandura, 1977). Cognitively flexible mothers likely exhibit behaviors that lead to increased social skills in children such as conversational sensitivity (Chesebro & Martin, 2003), caring and supportive communication (Curran & Andersen, 2017), and low levels of aggression (Martin et al., 1998). Principles from family systems theory suggest that adult children's cognitive flexibility can predict mother social skills. Although parents tend to exert more influence over children than vice versa, family interdependence posits that children also influence parents. Thus, a family member's cognitive flexibility should help create a communication environment that promotes high levels of positivity and care, and low levels of hostility.

H1. Cognitive flexibility will positively predict social skills for mother (H1a) and adult children (H1b).

H2. Mother reports of cognitive flexibility will positively predict child social skills (H2a), and child cognitive flexibility will positively predict mother social skills (H2b).

1.2. Cognitive flexibility and social support

Segrin et al. (2016) conceptualize social support as “behavior that conveys to others that they are valued and cared for and that they are part of a communication network (p. 123).” Social support buffers people from psychological distress and relates to high quality of life (Wright, King, & Rosenberg, 2014). Indeed, individuals who have higher levels of social support tend to live longer, healthier lives (Nyqvist, Pape, Pellfolk, Forsman, & Wahlbeck, 2014). According to the life-span theoretical perspective individuals perceive more social support when they experience positive interpersonal relationships (Uchino, 2009). Cognitively flexible individuals should have access to social support because they can maintain high quality relationships. Cognitively flexible people tend to express care and sensitivity in their interpersonal relationships (Curran & Andersen, 2017; Martin et al., 1998). As such, they likely build a network of people that are willing to provide various forms of support in times of distress or need. Moreover, Koesten, Schrodt, and Ford (2009) argue that cognitive flexible people are better able to cope with both internal and external stressors. One reason for this could be that cognitively flexible individuals can adapt their behaviors to attain their desired goal (Clark & Delia, 1979). Thus, when pursuing social support, flexible individuals likely possess the skills necessary to attain the support they seek. High and Scharp (2015) claim that a fundamental component of social support is support seeking communication. Support seeking ability and motivation are two crucial predictors of social support (High & Scharp, 2015). Because cognitive flexibility includes self-efficacy, it is logical to reason that flexible individuals would have high motivations and support seeking ability.

Partner cognitive flexibility should also predict social support for mothers and adult children. Having a cognitively flexible family member may increase social support because flexible individuals are supportive to their social network (Chesebro & Martin, 2003; Curran & Andersen, 2017). Flexible individuals are emotionally involved in their interpersonal relationships and show high levels of sensitivity and empathy to those around them (Chesebro & Martin, 2003; Martin et al., 1998). Thus, individuals likely benefit from having cognitively flexible family members via increased social support.

H3. Cognitive flexibility will positively predict social support for mother (H3a) and adult children (H3b).

H4. Mother reports of cognitive flexibility will positively predict child social support (H4a), and child cognitive flexibility will positively predict mother social support (H4b).

1.3. Cognitive flexibility and loneliness

Loneliness is a particularly important indicator of social adjustment. Feeling lonely is related to numerous health outcomes such as early mortality, suicide attempts, depression, and obesity (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; House et al., 1988). Loneliness is conceptualized as “a distressing feeling that accompanies the perception that one's social needs are not being met by the quantity or especially the quality of one's social relationship (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010) (p. 218).” According to Hawkley and Cacioppo's (2010) theory of loneliness, individuals who feel lonely typically feel threatened and uneasy in social environments. As Newall et al. (2009) explain, lonely people have negative expectations for social interactions and consequently distance themselves from others. Loneliness is partly characterized by feeling ostracized in social situations; this can lead to hostility, anxiety, and stress when socializing with other (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). As such, loneliness can spur a cycle of negative interactions wherein lonely people confirm their beliefs that social life is unrewarding and negative (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Newall et al., 2009). Increased cognitive flexibility should relate to decreased perceptions of loneliness. Cognitive flexibility is related to feeling comfortable and skilled in social interactions. Thus, feeling competent in social situations and consistently experiencing positive relationships should negatively relate to loneliness.

Partner cognitive flexibility should also negatively predict loneliness. Family members in part shape beliefs regarding social (Burke, Woszidlo, & Segrin, 2013). Partner cognitive flexibility can help establish a family environment wherein individuals perceive social relationships as rewarding, positive experiences. Moreover, research shows that there are intergenerational patterns of both loneliness and cognitive flexibility in families (Burke et al., 2013; Curran & Andersen, 2017). Thus, just as loneliness can create a dysfunctional family environment, partner cognitive flexibility should help create a positive and highly functioning family system. As such, it is expected that partner cognitive flexibility will negatively predict loneliness for mothers and adult children.

H5. Cognitive flexibility will negatively predict loneliness for mother (H5a) and adult children (H5b).

H6. Mother reports of cognitive flexibility will negatively predict child loneliness (H6a), and child cognitive flexibility will negatively predict mother loneliness (H6b).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedures

There were two methods for recruiting participants for this project. First, students were recruited from introductory communication studies courses at a large university in the Southeastern United States. Participants who were 18 years or older and had a living mother were eligible to participate. Students interested in participating were asked