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Negative parental attributions mediate associations between risk factors and dysfunctional parenting: A replication and extension

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ABSTRACT

The primary goal of the current study was to replicate our previous study in which was found that negative maternal attributions mediate the association between parenting stress and harsh and abusive discipline. In addition, we investigated this association in fathers, and added observational parenting data. During two home visits mothers and fathers were observed with their children (age 1.5–6.0 years), filled in questionnaires, and completed the Parental Attributions of Child behavior Task (PACT; a computerized attribution task). Similar to our previous study, negative parental attributions mediated the relation between parenting stress and self-reported harsh and abusive parenting for both mothers and fathers. For mothers, this mediation effect was also found in the relation between parenting stress and lower levels of observed supportive parenting in a challenging disciplinary task. In addition, the relation of partner-related stress and abuse risk with harsh, abusive, and (low) supportive parenting were also mediated by maternal negative attributions. When parenting stress, partner-related stress, and abuse risk were studied in one model, only parenting stress remained significant. Results are discussed in terms of the importance of targeting parental attributions for prevention and intervention purposes in families experiencing stress.

1. Introduction

Worldwide, millions of children are victims of child abuse and neglect (Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Alink, & Van IJzendoorn, 2015). As a result, many of these children experience serious consequences in the short term as well as in the longer term, with an increased risk for physical, psychological, and behavioral problems (e.g., Alink, Cicchetti, Kim, & Rogosch, 2012; Jonson-Reid, Kohl, & Drake, 2012). To prevent such problems later in life it is important to investigate the etiology of child maltreatment. According to the Social Information Processing (SIP) model negative parental attributions are important predictors of subsequent disciplinary actions and potentially, harsh or abusive parenting (Milner, 2003, 1993). Parents who attribute responsibility and hostile intent to the child and evaluate the behavior as more serious and wrong, are at risk for child abuse. Furthermore, disproportionately high child-related expectations, positive attitudes towards physical discipline, high stress levels, and the experience of childhood maltreatment by their own parents, are potential risk factors for negative attributions (Milner, 2003, 1993). The two latter factors were investigated in our previous study in relation to parental attributions and harsh and abusive parenting (Beckerman, Van Berkel, Mesman, & Alink, 2017). We found that the association between current experience of parenting stress and harsh and abusive discipline was mediated by negative parental attributions. No such associations were found for the other stress factors or for past childhood maltreatment. The objective of the current study was to replicate the previous study using a larger sample, and to further

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extend the findings by also including fathers, an additional risk factor (i.e., general child abuse risk), and observed parenting in addition to questionnaire data.

Parental attributions are defined as the parent's interpretation and evaluation of child behavior (Milner, 2003, 1993). The SIP model argues that judgments concerning child behaviors of parents at risk for child abuse differ, both quantitatively and qualitatively, from judgments of parents without such risk. Not only do parents at risk report more negative child behavior in daily situations, they also show differences in evaluations and attributing intentionality of child behavior compared to other parents. Parents who are at risk for child abuse may associate children's naughty or clumsy behaviors more often with internal and stable child characteristics and hostile intentions (e.g., "he spilled the milk because he wants to get back at me"). These parents are also expected to be less able to think of alternative explanations for the child's behavior (e.g., "he spilled the milk, because he is too young to hold the cup straight"). As a consequence, parents at risk for child abuse will attribute more responsibility to the child, and evaluate the child's behavior as more serious, wrong, and blameworthy compared to other parents which in turn elevates the risk for dysfunctional parenting strategies to follow (i.e., power assertive and harsh discipline; Milner, 2003, 1993).

The current experience of stress and the past experience of childhood maltreatment are important risk factors for parental attributions to become biased (Milner, 2003, 1993). Stress is thought to influence an individual's coping skills which results in automatic and rigid rather than controlled and flexible information processing. During automatic processing parents are less likely to take situational information into account. As a consequence, parents are less able to understand the child's behavior in context and will attribute more responsibility to the child, and evaluate the child's behavior as more wrong (Milner, 2003, 1993). Empirical evidence shows that people who are (chronically) stressed show cognitive impairments, such as problems in learning and memory (Kuhlmann, Piel, & Wolf, 2005; Lupien, Maheu, Tu, Fiocco, & Schramek, 2007), and are indeed more likely to process information automatically and habitually instead of in a controlled and flexible manner (Hermans, Henckens, Joëls, & Fernández, 2014; Vogel et al., 2015).

The experience of childhood maltreatment is thought to influence parental attributions through the effect it has on parents' pre-existing cognitions (i.e., general beliefs about children and childrearing (Milner, 2003, 1993). The model theorizes that these general beliefs are a result of prior experiences with children, but that they are mainly formed by experiences parents had in their own childhood with their own caregivers. It has been proposed that parents are particularly influenced by their pre-existing cognitions when they evaluate ambiguous child behavior (i.e., challenging but age-appropriate child behavior; Milner, 2003, 1993). The idea that parenting is guided by pre-existing schemata, is similar to the assumption of the attachment theory that internal working models provide a basis for parenting (Milner, 2003). According to attachment theory, mental representations of the self and others (i.e., internal working models) are formed in the context of child-caregiver relationship (i.e. attachment), and guide future thought, feelings, and behavior (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). There is indeed evidence that such intergenerational transmission of parenting occurs (Van IJzendoorn, 1992; Verhage et al., 2016).

A large number of studies have confirmed the hypothesized differences in parental attributions of parents at risk for abuse or parents who are abusing, versus low-risk and non-abusing parents (e.g., Ateah & Durrant, 2005; Burchinal, Skinner, & Reznick, 2010; Chilamkurti & Milner, 1993; De Paul, Asla, Perez-Albeniz, & De Cadiz, 2006; Irwin, Skowronski, Crouch, Milner, & Zengel, 2014; Larrance & Twentyman, 1983; Slep & O'Leary, 1998). Far less research has examined parental attributions in relation to current stress and childhood maltreatment, and its potential mediating role between risk factors and harsh and abusive parenting. Some empirical evidence is available. For example, parenting stress and socioeconomic strain were found to be associated with negative parental attributions (e.g., Berlin, Dodge, & Reznick, 2013; Haskett, Scott, Willoughby, Ahern, & Nears, 2006), and negative parental attributions were found to mediate the relation between parental abuse history and their use of harsh and abusive parenting (Dixon, Browne, & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005). However, most research demonstrates the direct association between current stressors or past experiences of childhood maltreatment and harsh and abusive parenting, without testing mediational pathways that include parental cognitions as suggested by the SIP-model (Stith et al., 2009).

We conducted one of the first studies exploring parental attributions as a potential mediating mechanism between daily stressors (i.e., low SES, partner-related stress, and parenting stress), parent's own history of childhood maltreatment, and harsh and abusive parenting in a general population sample (Beckerman et al., 2017). Fifty-three Dutch mothers of 2- to 6-year-old children reported on daily stressors and their experiences of childhood maltreatment and completed the Parental Attributions of Child behavior Task (PACT) a computerized attribution task (Beckerman et al., 2017). Negative parental attributions mediated the association between current experience of parenting stress and harsh and abusive discipline. This suggests that the type of stress that affects parental attribution may be quite specific to stressors that are directly related to the child or to parenting. However, several limitations of this study raise questions about the robustness of these results.

First, the sample size of the Beckerman et al. (2017) study was quite small, making it difficult to identify small effects. Second, the study only included mothers. We cannot simply apply models found for mothers to fathers, because it has been suggested that fathers are different from mothers in their parenting (mother: secure base, talk vs. father: play, exploration, discipline), in their biological makeup (different stress responses), and in the amount of time they spend with their children (although paternal involvement increased significantly since the second half of the twentieth century, on average mothers still spend more time with their children) (Kudielka & Kirschbaum, 2005; Lamb, 2010; Ramchandani & Psychogiou, 2009). Moreover, several studies suggest that attributions concerning child behavior are not only different for mothers and fathers (Chen, Seipp, & Johnston, 2008; Lansford et al., 2011), but also predict child and parenting outcomes differently (Werner, 2012; Williamson & Johnston, 2015). So, with these important notions in mind, the current study examined negative maternal as well as paternal attributions.

In addition to the limitations of small sample size and not studying fathers, only self-report questionnaires were used to measure harsh and abusive parenting. There is evidence that self-reported parenting may be subject to social desirability and is not, or only

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