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## Mother–Adolescent conflict in African American and European American families: The role of corporal punishment, adolescent aggression, and adolescents' hostile attributions of mothers' intent



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### A B S T R A C T

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The present study examined mothers' use of corporal punishment and adolescents' aggression as predictors of mother–youth conflict during early adolescence. Particular attention was given to the potential mediating role that adolescents' hostile attributions of intent (HAI) regarding mothers' behavior might play in connections between corporal punishment, youth aggression, and mother–adolescent conflict for European American (EA) and African American (AA) youth. Data were collected from 268 12- to 14-year-olds (154 European American; 114 African American; 133 girls; 135 boys) and their mothers over a period of 2 years. Questionnaires completed by both mothers and adolescents were used to assess maternal corporal punishment and adolescent aggression, and interviews concerning hypothetical situations were used to assess adolescent HAI in year one. In both year one and year two mother–adolescent conflict was observed in a laboratory interaction session. Data revealed that adolescent HAI mediated the link between maternal corporal punishment and mother–adolescent conflict for EA, but not AA youth. Adolescents' HAI mediated the link between adolescent aggression and mother–adolescent conflict for both EA and AA families.

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### Introduction

The transition to adolescence is marked by a small, but significant, increase in conflict between parents and children (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006). To some extent, these changes are considered to be a normative result of the cognitive, social, and physiological transformations that coincide with puberty (Conger & Ge, 1999; Steinberg, 1987), as well as disturbances in self-concept development that occur during the transition to adolescence (Rosenberg, 1985). However, there are wide individual differences in the rate and intensity of parent–adolescent conflict across families (Smetana et al., 2006). Furthermore, parent–child conflict can take different forms (Smetana, 1996), with some forms falling into a category of developmentally appropriate disagreement surrounding issues of autonomy and

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independence (Adams & Laursen, 2007), and other forms of conflict characterized by atypical hostility and coercion (Conger & Ge, 1999). It is the more hostile and coercive form of conflict that past research associates with adolescents' emotional distress (Chung, Flook, & Fuligni, 2009), declines in academic performance (Dotterer, Hoffman, Crouter, & McHale, 2008), and problems in adult romantic relationships (Overbeek, Stattin, Vermulst, Ha, & Engles, 2007). Consequently, the focus of the current study is on understanding factors that are associated with parent–child hostile and coercive conflict during the transition to adolescence.

#### *Adolescents' hostile attributions of mothers' intent*

According to Social Information Processing (SIP) Theory (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, 1980), one mechanism that may account for individual differences in parent–adolescent conflict is the cognitive attributions that adolescents make regarding parental behavior (Dodge, 2006). Attributions are naïve causal explanations that individuals form in order to better comprehend, predict and respond to their environment (Kelley, 1967). Formally labeled “hostile attribution bias,” such misattributions are viewed as being a SIP error in which youth interpret ambiguous situations as being hostile (Burks, Laird, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1999; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992). It is also possible, however, that hostile attributions are not always in error or mis-attributions, but rather reflect accurate expectations of parent behavior (MacKinnon-Lewis, Lamb, Hattie, & Baradaran, 2001). When an adolescent is confronted with an ambiguous situation, a knowledge structure will be referenced to help the adolescent interpret and decide on the appropriate course of action. Adolescents who are prone to accessing hostile knowledge structures may be more likely to attribute hostile intent to the ambiguous situation, which in turn increases the likelihood that they will choose a hostile response.

#### *Connections between mother–adolescent conflict and hostile attributions of intent*

Adolescents' Hostile Attributions of Intent (HAI) may arise out of a history of negative, or conflictual, interactions they have experienced with their mother. Empirical support for this argument comes from evidence that children who are prone to make HAI are more coercive (MacKinnon-Lewis et al., 1992) and argumentative (Grace, Kelley, & McCain, 1993) when interacting with their mother. To date, however, the majority of existing research on children's attributions has relied on cross-sectional data, so that the direction of effect cannot be confidently determined. As a notable exception to this trend, MacKinnon-Lewis and her colleagues (MacKinnon-Lewis, Lamb, Hattie, & Baradaran, 2001) revealed that boys 7- to 9-years-old were more likely to attribute hostile intent to their mothers in ambiguous situations if their mothers were more aggressive in their behavior six to nine months earlier than were boys of mothers who had been less aggressive earlier. This evidence suggests that inferences about hostile intent in the parent–child relationship may stem from having repeated encounters characterized by hostility and aggression that lead to the formation of “cognitive schemas.” In turn, children's HAI for maternal behavior could contribute to an increase in mother–adolescent conflict during the transition to adolescence. However, the limited scope of existing studies, and the fact that to date research has focused exclusively on mothers and sons rather than mothers and daughters, calls for replication and extension of these findings.

#### *Corporal punishment and HAI*

It is important to consider that other facets of parent–child interaction may relate to adolescents' HAI. Parents' use of corporal punishment may be particularly relevant to adolescents' formation of attributions of intent. Heidgerken, Hughes, Cavell, and Willson (2004) found that children who experienced harsh discipline, including the use of spanking and other forms of corporal punishment, in the home were more likely to endorse hostile goals in responding to peer behavior, and to make HAI to ambiguous social situations with peers, which in turn predicted children being rated as more aggressive by teachers and peers. Similarly Haskett and Willoughby (2007) found that corporal punishment, characterized by intrusiveness, negative regard, and physical discipline, was associated with children's HAI in response to hypothetical negative peer interactions and children's endorsement of hostile responses to peers. Based on these findings, the current study examines a model wherein corporal punishment is predicted to contribute to HAI and to elevated levels of parent–adolescent conflict (see Fig. 1).

#### *Child aggression and HAI*

Alternatively, it may be that adolescents' aggressive tendencies contribute to HAI about parenting behavior, which in turn promotes conflicted parent–child interaction. Youth who are prone to aggression have a clear hostile bias when making inferences about the actions of others (de Castro, Veerman, Koops, Bosch, & Monshouwer, 2002; Dodge, 1980). Research focusing on children's peer relationships has demonstrated that aggressive children are more inclined than nonaggressive children to interpret peer's intentions in a negative light (Burks et al. 1999; Lansford, Malone, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2010). Although less well documented, empirical evidence also suggests that aggressive children are more likely than nonaggressive children to assign hostile intentions to their mother's behavior (Weiss et al., 1992). In addition, MacKinnon-Lewis et al. (2001) found that boys' negative attributions directly and significantly predicted subsequent hostile behavior with mothers, even after earlier measures of aggressive behavior were taken into account. Although the direction of effect is open to interpretation, this evidence suggests that a tendency toward aggression may contribute to HAI of mother's behavior in a way that

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