

Psychological Control and Routines as Mediators of Negative Parenting and Externalizing Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Facets of negative parenting practices [NPP] are linked with child externalizing behaviors. Moreover, research shows that daily child routines partially mediate the relationship between NPP and externalizing behaviors. Psychological control is another aspect of negative parenting linked with child disruptive behaviors. Yet, no past studies have explored psychological control and child routines simultaneously; therefore, the current study examined psychological control and routines as serial mediators linking NPP to child externalizing behaviors. Mothers of children between the ages of 6-12 completed questionnaires assessing parenting practices, psychological control, child routines, and child externalizing behaviors. Results suggest that parents with more NPP display more psychological control and less frequent routines, which separately relate to more child externalizing behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

- Externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression, noncompliance) are the most common reason for referrals to mental health providers due to externalizing behaviors causing significant impairment in a child's functioning (Frick et al., 2010).
- Research has consistently shown that NPP (e.g., poor monitoring, inconsistent discipline) relate to child externalizing behaviors (Coln et al., 2013; Gryczkowski et al., 2010).
- From a developmental perspective, NPP set the stage for child externalizing behaviors because NPP disrupt the parent-child relationship (Patterson et al., 1989).
- A facet of NPP that has received less attention in the literature is psychological control (i.e., parents' attempt to manipulate their child's behaviors through guilt induction or invalidation of feelings), which is predictive of externalizing behaviors (Barber, 1996; Coln et al., 2013; Symeou & Georgiou, 2017).
- Moreover, inconsistent child routines are associated with more child externalizing behaviors (Larsen & Jordan, 2019; Sytsma et al., 2001). In fact, infrequent child routines have been shown to partially mediate the relationship between NPP and child externalizing behaviors (Jordan et al., 2013).
- However, the role of psychological control in the context of NPP, routines, and behavior problems, has not yet been explored. Perhaps, parents who engage in NPP use more psychological control in their parenting, which in turn, is associated with less consistency in child routines and more externalizing behaviors.
- Thus, the current study seeks to examine the relationship between these variables in a serial mediation model.

Hypothesis

- The relationship between NPP and child externalizing behaviors will be mediated by psychological control and then child routines. Meaning, greater psychological control and inconsistent child routines will be mechanisms through which NPP relate to child externalizing behaviors.

Statistical Analyses

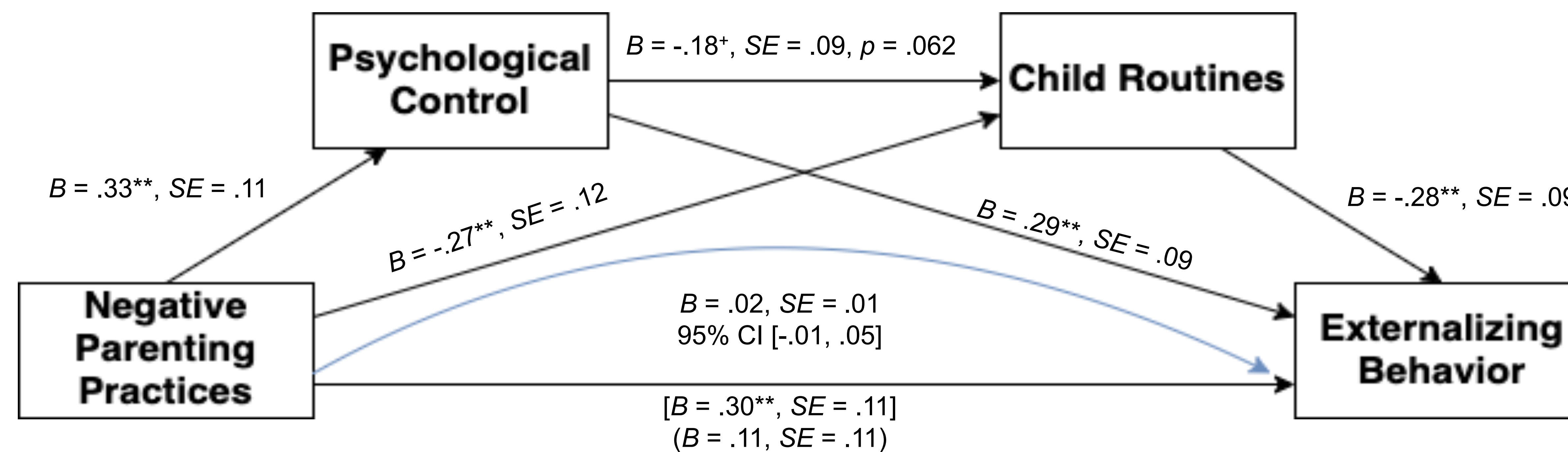
- Zero-order correlations between possible controls (i.e., child gender, age, ethnicity, SES) and variables of interest were examined. Demographic variables were not correlated with the outcome variable (externalizing behavior), so no controls were included in the model. See Table 1 for the correlations among the variables of interest.
- A serial mediation analysis was conducted (PROCESS, Model 6), using bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals based on 5,000 samples (Hayes, 2017; Figure 1).

Table 1 Correlations Among Negative Parenting Practices, Psychological Control, Child Routines, and Externalizing Behavior

	Negative Parenting Practices	Psychological Control	Child Routines	Externalizing Behavior
Negative Parenting Practices	---	.362**	-.327**	.324**
Psychological Control		---	-.269**	.399**
Child Routines			---	-.397**

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Figure 1 Path Analysis of Negative Parenting Practices, Psychological Control, Child Routines, Externalizing Behavior



Standardized regression coefficients are reported. The statistics in brackets show the total effect of negative parenting practices on externalizing behavior. The statistics in parenthesis show the direct effect of negative parenting practices on externalizing behavior, after controlling for the indirect effect of psychological control and child routines. The significance of the indirect effects were evaluated based on an asymmetric 95% confidence interval with 5,000 resamples with replacement (Hayes, 2017).

Note: * $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

DISCUSSION

- Consistent with previous research, mothers who endorsed more NPP reported using fewer routines and that their child engaged in more externalizing behaviors (Gryczkowski et al., 2010; Jordan, 2003). In addition, psychological control was inversely related to the frequency of child routines.
- Contrary to our hypothesis, psychological control and child routines did not sequentially mediate the relationship between NPP and child routines. However, the link between psychological control and child routines in the serial mediation model was trending towards significance. Our sample size may not have had sufficient statistical power to detect a significant indirect effect for the serial mediation.
- When considered separately, psychological control and child routines both independently mediated the relationship between NPP and externalizing behaviors.
- Findings suggest that NPP is linked to externalizing behaviors through psychological control. It is theorized that the use of psychological control, as a facet of negative parenting practices, creates a coercive parent-child relationship, which sets the context for child externalizing behaviors (Patterson et al., 1989).
- Findings are consistent with prior studies indicating that child routines are a mechanism through which NPP relate to externalizing behaviors (Jordan et al., 2013). It may be the case that inconsistency in parents' interactions with their children, such as infrequent child routines, elicits child externalizing behaviors.
- The current study expanded the literature by providing evidence for an inverse relationship between psychological control and the frequency of child routines.
- The findings of the current study indicate important components of interventions for parents of children with externalizing behaviors. Implementing child routines may be helpful in reducing externalizing behaviors because routines provide a more predictable environment and establish expectations for the child, which promote compliance (Sytsma et al., 2001). Additionally, child routines are easy to implement and cost-effective (Harris et al., 2014).
- Another important component of interventions is teaching parents to flexibly respond to their child's behaviors, rather than manipulating their child's behaviors through coercive means. Parents of children with externalizing behaviors may benefit from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy techniques that foster present moment awareness and values-based behaviors, which have been associated with adaptive parenting practices (Brassell et al., 2016).
- Limitations of the current study include the exclusive use of parent-report measures from a single informant (married female caregivers), a cross-sectional design (data collected at a single time-point), and inclusion of only school-age children.
- Future studies should utilize a multi-informant, multi-method approach, as well as a longitudinal design to better understand the temporal relationships between the variables.
- Future research should also evaluate this model in relation to other aspects of child adjustment (e.g., internalizing behaviors, prosocial behaviors) and across a variety of ages.

METHOD

Participants

- 121 mothers with children between the ages of 6 and 12 years ($M = 8.59$, $SD = 1.93$)
- Mothers:** M age of 36 ($SD = 6.57$); 59.5% had at least a high school degree
- Children:** 54.5% female; 69.4% White, 27.3% Black, 3.3% Mixed/Other; 5.8% had previous psychological treatment

Measures

- Demographic Questionnaire**
- Alabama Parenting Questionnaire** (APQ; Frick, 1991)
 - 42-item self-report measure of positive and negative parenting practices
 - Z-scores for the Negative Parenting composite (Poor Monitoring/Supervision and Inconsistent Discipline)
- Psychological Control Questionnaire** (PCQ; Olsen et al., 2002)
 - 33-item self-report measure of psychological control of the child (e.g., guilt induction, invalidating feelings)
- Child Routines Questionnaire** (CRQ; Sytsma et al., 2001)
 - 39-item parent-report measure of the frequency of child routines (e.g., daily living routines, discipline routines)
- Child Behavior Checklist/6-18** (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001)
 - 113-item parent-report measure of internalizing and externalizing behaviors in children
 - T-scores for the Externalizing Problems composite

Procedure

Mothers were recruited from schools and community groups in the southeastern U.S. Participants were required to be female caregivers, currently married, married for at least 1 year, be at least 18 years old, and have a child between the ages of 6 and 12. Following informed consent, participants completed the questionnaires.

RESULTS

- Zero-order correlations between the variables of interest were in the expected directions. NPP was positively correlated with psychological control and child externalizing behavior. The frequency of child routines was negatively correlated with NPP, psychological control, and child externalizing behavior. Psychological control and child externalizing behavior were also positively correlated.
- The total effect of NPP on externalizing behavior was significant, but the direct effect of NPP on externalizing behavior, after controlling for the indirect effect of psychological control and child routines, was not significant.
- Total indirect effect was significant, $B = .19$, $SE = .07$, 95% CI [.08, .35].
- The specific indirect effect of NPP on externalizing behavior through psychological control (independent of child routines) was significant, $B = .10$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [.04, .20].
- The specific indirect effect of NPP on externalizing behavior through child routines (independent of psychological control) was also significant, $B = .08$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI [.01, .20].
- However, the specific indirect effect of NPP on externalizing behavior through first psychological control and then child routines was not significant (CI inclusive of zero), $B = .02$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI [-.01, .05].

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