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Permalink

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Journal

Journal of Family Psychology, 32(4)

ISSN

0893-3200

Authors

Clark, D Angus
Donnellan, M Brent
Robins, Richard W

Publication Date

2018-06-01

DOI

10.1037/fam0000408

Peer reviewed



Published in final edited form as:

J Fam Psychol. 2018 June ; 32(4): 544–551. doi:10.1037/fam0000408.

Personality Traits and Parent-Adolescent Interactions: An Observational Study of Mexican Origin Families

D. Angus Clark,

Texas A&M University

M. Brent Donnellan, and

Texas A&M University

Richard W. Robins

University of California, Davis

Abstract

Parent-child interactions are likely influenced by the personality characteristics of both the parent and the child. However, questions remain concerning the bi-directional nature of these effects (e.g., does a child's personality evoke changes in his/her parent's behavior?). Furthermore, the existing literature is based primarily on European-American children, and generally relies on questionnaire measures of parent-child interactions rather than assessing behavior during observed interactions. To address these gaps in the literature, we evaluated reciprocal associations between personality traits and observed interactions between Mexican-origin adolescents ($N = 674$) and their parents in 5th and 7th grade using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Adolescent Effortful Control and Aggressiveness were associated with adolescent warmth and hostility (i.e., actor effects) and parent warmth and hostility (i.e., partner effects). Thus, adolescents with poor self-control seem to evoke more negative behaviors from their parents than adolescents with better self-control. Parental Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism predicted parent warmth (actor effects), but there was little evidence that parent personality was associated with specific adolescent behaviors (partner effects). These results help to clarify how personality attributes are associated with adolescent relationships.

Keywords

Personality; Temperament; Parent-Adolescent Interactions; Observed Behaviors

Introduction

Positive parent-adolescent interactions are associated with positive outcomes for youth (Collins & Laursen, 2004). For example, youth who have a positive relationship with their parents are less likely to engage in externalizing behavior (Manders et al., 2006; Oliver,

Correspondence regarding this manuscript should be addressed to D. Angus Clark, Department of Psychology, Texas A&M University, 4235 TAMU, College Station, TX 77840. dangus3@email.tamu.edu.

A portion of this project was presented as a poster at the 2016 Meeting of the Society of Social and Personality Psychology in San Diego, California.

2009) and substance use (Ryan, Jorm, & Lubman, 2010), and exhibit greater prosocial tendencies (Collins & Laursen, 2004). In light of these findings, it is useful to understand the factors that contribute to parent-adolescent interactions. There is evidence that the personalities of adolescents and their parents are associated with how these individuals interact with one another (Belsky, 1984; Bates, Schermerhorn, & Petersen, 2012; Prinzie et al., 2009; Wilson & Durbin, 2012). More work is needed to further explore the nature of these relations, and the degree to which they generalize across different developmental stages, ethnic groups, and research designs. Accordingly, we evaluated how parent and adolescent personality traits were associated with aspects of parent-adolescent relationships coded from observed interactions in a sample of Mexican-origin youth and their parents.

Traits of Temperament and Adult Personality

Individual differences in affective reactions and self-control are evident across the lifespan (Rothbart, 2011). Developmental researchers interested in these constructs typically study temperament whereas adult personality researchers interested in these constructs typically study traits. Childhood and adolescent temperament are often conceptualized in terms of three broad higher-order dimensions (Rothbart, 2011). *Surgency* captures individual differences in positive emotionality and the tendency to approach novel and rewarding stimuli (Rothbart, 2011). *Negative affectivity* captures individual differences in the propensity to experience negative emotions such as fear and frustration (Rothbart, 2011). *Effortful Control* captures individual differences in the ability to regulate attention, emotion, and behavior (Rothbart, 2011). A related characteristic – *aggressiveness* – is often included alongside these three dimensions and captures individual differences in hostility and reactive approach tendencies (Rothbart et al., 1994).

In adulthood, trait researchers often study individual differences in five broad domains (John & Soto, 2008). *Extraversion* is the adult analog of surgency and captures individual differences in positive emotionality, activity level, and sociability (Shiner & De Young, 2013). *Neuroticism* is the adult analog of negative affectivity and captures individual differences in the tendency to experience negative emotions (Shiner & De Young, 2013). *Conscientiousness* is the adult analog of effortful control (Shiner & De Young, 2013) and captures individual differences in self-control and forethought. *Agreeableness* captures individual differences in trust and selflessness, and is related to lower levels of early life aggressiveness (Gleason et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2011). *Openness* captures individual differences in intellect and aesthetics. Given the conceptual and empirical overlap between early life and adult dispositions, we refer to both as personality traits in the remainder of this report.

Personality Traits and Parent-Child Interactions

A useful framework for quantifying how personality traits are associated with parent-adolescent interactions is provided by the Actor-Partner Interdependence model APIM; e.g., Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). The APIM simultaneously considers how an individual's characteristic is associated with his/her own behavior in a relationship (i.e., an "actor effect"), as well as how that individual's characteristic is associated with his/her partner's behavior (i.e., a "partner effect"). Partner effects often capture evocative effects whereby the

individual characteristics of one person serve to elicit a particular response from another person and these effects have received increased attention when considering parenting (i.e., “child effects”; Bell, 1968; Scarr & McCartney, 1983).

There is evidence that both child and parent personality attributes are associated with their own behaviors in the context of parent-child interactions and parenting (roughly corresponding, conceptually, to actor effects). Effortful control, for example, has been associated more responsiveness and less negativity by children towards parents (Wilson & Durbin, 2012). Furthermore, more conscientious, agreeable, and extraverted parents are warmer to their children, whereas more neurotic parents demonstrate greater strictness (Paulussen-Hoogeboom et al., 2007; Prinzie et al., 2009). Evidence for child and parent traits predicting the others’ behavior (i.e., roughly corresponding, conceptually, to partner effects) is strongest for the traits of children evoking parental behaviors, rather than vice-versa. Negative affectivity in children generally evokes less warmth and sensitivity, whereas surgency and effortful control evoke greater warmth and sensitivity (Bates, Schermerhorn, & Petersen, 2012; Paulussen-Hoogeboom et al., 2007; Wilson & Durbin, 2012; Coplan, Reichel, & Rowan, 2009; Clark et al., 2000; de Haan et al., 2012; Latzman et al., 2009; Prinzie et al., 2012).

Current Study

The current study extends previous work in several ways. Previous studies tend to focus on younger children, rely on self/informant-reports of parent-child interactions, and/or focus on only one member of the relationship at a time. Further, most work includes samples that are predominantly European-American, and excludes fathers. The current study addresses these limitations by examining actor and partner effects of personality traits on the observed behaviors of Mexican-origin adolescents interacting with their mothers and fathers.

It is important to study Mexican-origin families because despite being one of the largest and most rapidly increasing ethnic groups in the U.S. (U.S. Census, 2011), there is a relative lack of research on observed parent-adolescent dynamics in Mexican-origin families (Crockett et al., 2007). This is especially true when considering personality and temperament. Such omissions are noteworthy as there may be ethnic differences in parenting practices (e.g., more authoritarian parenting in Mexican-origin families; Calzada et al., 2012), as well as in the perceived desirability of those practices (Crockett et al., 2007). Similarly, negative affect may have different correlates in Mexican Americans because of cultural differences in the importance of social cohesion and interdependence (Campos et al., 2014). Thus, findings obtained with European-American samples may not generalize to Mexican-origin families. On the other hand, there might be more evidence of similarity than differences between ethnic groups in regards to the processes underlying family dynamics (Calzada et al., 2012; Fulgini, 1998; Julian et al., 1994). Regardless, it is important to study family processes in diverse samples to determine when findings generalize.

Past research based on European American samples suggests that adolescent personality traits may be more strongly associated with their own, and their parents’, observed behaviors than parents’ personality traits. Traits related to effortful control may be especially relevant (e.g., Wilson & Durbin, 2012). Differences across parent and child gender are considered in

this study as well. Mothers and fathers of Mexican-origin may interact with adolescents in different ways (e.g., mothers may be warmer, adolescents may be less hostile with fathers) (Crockett et al., 2007), and further, traditional, cultural gender roles (e.g., machismo and marianismo) may create gendered-patterns of interactions between parents and child (e.g., parents may be warmer with daughters and more permissive with sons; see Dumka et al., 2009). We note these possibilities while also recognizing the need to be wary of what can become clichés about gender norms in Mexican-origin culture (McHale et al., 2005). Furthermore, although gender differences in mean levels are not uncommon, gender differences in actual processes, in terms of the associations between variables, tend to be rarer (Cohen et al., 1995; see also Rowe et al., 1994).

Method

Participants and Procedures

The data come from the California Families Project, a longitudinal study of 674 Mexican-origin youth (50% girls) and their parents. To recruit families, names were drawn at random from rosters of students in the Sacramento and Woodland, CA, school districts. The focal child had to be in the 5th grade, living with her or his biological mother (82% of youth come from two parent households; participating fathers were the youths biological father), and of Mexican origin (i.e. of Mexican ancestry); 29% of focal children were born in Mexico, as were 84% of mothers, and 88% of fathers. The average age of mothers at the time recruitment was 36.80 years ($SD = 5.90$), and the average age of fathers was 39.40 years ($SD = 6.10$). The average annual family income was between \$30,000 and \$35,000 (range from 0\$ – \$5,000 to over \$200,000). On average, mothers and fathers had completed 9 years of education (range from 1 to 20 for mothers, and 1 to 27 for fathers). Participants were interviewed in their homes by trained research staff in Spanish or English, depending on preference. Interviewers were fluent in both languages, and were either themselves Latino/a, or were experienced working with the Latino community. Parents were not present when their child was interviewed.

During each wave of data collection, families were visited twice in their homes over a 1 week period (each visit lasted 2 to 3 hours). Participating family members completed a set of computer-assisted interviews. To collect the observational data, parent-adolescent dyads participated in 20-minute video recorded tasks during the second home visit. Mother-adolescent and father-adolescent sessions were held separately, one following the other (order randomly counterbalanced). Parent-adolescent dyads were instructed by the interviewer to discuss their life together. Cue cards with relevant questions were provided to facilitate discussion (e.g., discuss pleasurable activities that are done together; discuss how conflicts are addressed). During these sessions the interviewer and other parent (if a two-parent family) were absent; as much privacy as possible was established for the interactive sessions. All data collection procedures were approved by the University of California, Davis IRB (#217484-22; “Mexican Family Culture and Substance Use Risk and Resilience”).

The personality and observational data come from when the target youth were in the 5th ($M_{age} = 10.40$ years, $SD = 0.61$) and 7th grade ($M_{age} = 12.80$ years, $SD = 0.49$). The

inclusion of both waves of data helps to provide more stable estimates of effect sizes, and allows for the examination of the extent to which effects are consistent over time during a period of development in which adolescents' relationships with their parents may be changing (e.g., adolescents are becoming more independent from their parents and more reliant on peers; Clark et al., 2017; Collins & Laursen, 2004). At the 5th grade assessment, 611 youth, 609 mothers, and 385 fathers participated in the observational assessments. At the 7th grade assessment, 532 youth, 522 mothers, and 288 fathers participated in the observational assessments. Families that only participated in the 5th grade assessment were similar to families that participated in both the 5th and 7th grade assessment on the study variables (Cohen's d s from .02 to .24; average effect size = .09; all p s > .05). Families with a participating father at any wave were generally similar to families without a participating father on the study variables, though adolescents from families without a participating father were rated as significantly more aggressive, and demonstrated significantly more hostility in the interactions (d s from .03 to .22; average effect size = .09).

Measures

Adolescent Temperament—Adolescent temperament was assessed with the 64-item *Early Adolescent Temperament Questionnaire – Revised* (EATQ - R; Ellis & Rothbart, 2001) (1 to 4 rating scale; higher values denote greater levels of the trait; sample item: “When someone tells me to stop doing something, it is easy for me to stop”). Temperament scores were obtained from both the target youth and their mothers at the 5th and 7th grade assessments (father reports of youth temperament were not collected). The EATQ-R scales assess surgency (6 items; Coefficient as from .15 to .39 across time points and informants), negative affectivity (11 items; as from .74 to .79), and effortful control (16 items; as from .65 to .80), as well as dispositional aggressiveness (6 items; as ranged from .67 to .79).

Parent Personality—Mothers and fathers completed the 44-item Big Five Inventory (BFI; Benet-Martinez & John, 1998) during the 5th and 7th grade assessments (1 to 5 rating scale; higher values denote greater levels of the trait; sample item: “You see yourself as someone who is talkative”). The BFI measures extraversion (8 items; as ranged from .59 to .70 across assessments and parents), neuroticism (8 items; as ranged from .62 to .71), conscientiousness (9 items; as from .67 to .72), and agreeableness (9 items; as from .57 to .65). Scores were computed by averaging the items of a given personality dimension. The openness scale was not considered because there is no analogous temperamental trait in the EATQ-R.

Observed warmth and hostility—Parent-child interactions were rated using the Iowa Family Interaction Rating Scales (IFIR; Melby & Conger, 2001). The IFIR is a coding system designed to assess the nature of behavioral exchanges, and overall family processes. This coding system is a well validated method for capturing various family dynamics (Melby & Conger, 2001), and is widely used to study the antecedents and consequences of parent-child, and romantic partner, interactions (e.g., Conger et al., 2003; Donnellan et al., 2004; Lorenz et al., 2012; Wurzel et al., 2016). The IFIR includes nine dyadic interaction scales that were used to create two composite dimensions, *warmth* (as from .85 and .86) and *hostility* (as from .78 and .85). The warmth dimension includes the “supportive”,

“prosocial”, “communication”, and “positive mood” behavioral scales. The hostility dimension includes the “hostility”, “angry coercion”, “dominance”, and “antisocial” behavioral scales. Individual behavioral scales were scored from 1 to 9 with higher values denoting more observations of the target behavior; scales capture behavior from the observational target to their interactive partner. Warmth and hostility composites were created by averaging together the scores of individual scales.

Behavior was coded by project staff members who were trained over a 2–3 month period, and subsequently participated in recurring training sessions to prevent drift. Prior to rating the interactive tasks for this study, coders had to rate pre-coded interaction videos and achieve at least 90% agreement with the standard ratings. Different coders rated child and parent behavior. Videos were randomly assigned to each coder; 20% of videos were randomly selected to be rated by a second coder in order to gauge inter-rater reliability. The intra-class correlations between raters for the warmth scales ranged from .68 (adolescent to father) to .70 (mother to adolescent), and for the hostility scales ranged from .77 (father to adolescent) to .80 (child to father).

Data Analytic Strategy

Data were analyzed using the “stacked” Actor Partner Interdependence Model (see Figure 1; Kashy & Donnellan, 2012; Peugh et al., 2013). The stacked variant of the APIM uses multiple waves of data to obtain more precise estimates of actor and partner effects by pooling information across multiple waves. This model allowed us to consider 5th and 7th grade effects simultaneously by using constraints in a structural equation modeling framework (See Figure 1; see supplemental material for model specification details and sample syntax; osf.io/bvsk5). Adolescent-mother and adolescent-father dyads were analyzed separately given that adolescents interacted with mothers and fathers in separate observations (i.e., the interactions were dyadic and not triadic). We evaluated the equivalence of actor and partner effects across time, and across adolescent sex by using nested model comparisons (see osf.io/bvsk5).

As the APIM requires analogous variables across dyad members, models were estimated for each trait for which there were conceptually corresponding personality measures for parents and adolescents. Mother and adolescent temperament ratings were used as indicators of latent temperament variables in the APIMs. Prior to the main analyses, measurement equivalence between time points and raters was considered and the most justifiably constrained measurement model was used in the main analyses (see osf.io/bvsk5 for details). All models were estimated with full information maximum likelihood using Mplus version 8.0 (Muthen & Muthen, 1998-2017).

Results

Tables 1 and 2 contain descriptive statistics for the main study variables. Table 2 also shows the actor and partner effects from the adolescent-mother APIM models, and the adolescent-father APIM models (auto-correlations for each model can be found at osf.io/bvsk5). Models were also run that included auto-regressions instead of auto-correlations; results were consistent across specifications and can be found at osf.io/bvsk5). With the exception of the

extraversion/surgency model for predicting father-adolescent warmth, there was no evidence that actor and partner effects were different across time. Furthermore, all actor and partner effects were equal across adolescent boys and girls except those observed when considering neuroticism/negative affectivity and father-adolescent hostility. Most reported models had acceptable fit by conventional standards with RMSEAs ranging from .006 to .076, CFIs from .862 to .999, TLIs from .804 to .998, SRMRs from .041 to .093 (see osf.io/bvsk5 for full details of fit and model comparisons; models that included auto-regressions instead of auto-correlations generally fit excellently, and support the conclusions described here).

Mothers and Adolescents

More extraverted and agreeable mothers were slightly, but statistically significantly, more likely to demonstrate warmth towards adolescents. In contrast, mothers with higher levels of neuroticism were less likely to demonstrate warmth, and slightly more likely to demonstrate hostile behavior. The only maternal partner effects were observed for the trait of neuroticism. Mothers with higher levels of neuroticism elicited slightly less warmth, and more hostility, from their adolescents. Again, though statistically significant, these effects were relatively small in size (β s ranged from $|.08|$ to $|.15|$).

Relatively larger actor and partner effects (β s ranged from $|.26|$ to $|.47|$) were observed for adolescent personality traits. Higher levels of effortful control were associated with more adolescent and maternal warmth, and less adolescent and maternal hostility. In contrast, higher levels of aggressiveness were associated with less adolescent and maternal warmth, and more adolescent and maternal hostility. Negative Affectivity was associated with less youth and parent hostility, but was negligibly related to warmth.

Fathers and Adolescents

Fathers' personality traits were generally unrelated to observed hostility. The one statistically significant path, from consciousness to hostility, indicated that more consciousness fathers elicited slightly less hostility from youth. There were also statistically significant, positively signed, actor effects of extraversion, and conscientiousness for warmth. Further, a statistically significant partner effect suggested that more extraverted fathers elicited slightly more warmth. However, this partner effect was only present during grade 7. All effects described here were small in magnitude (β s ranged from $|.09|$ to $|.13|$).

Adolescent effortful control and aggressiveness were again associated with both actor and partner effects. Effortful control predicted more adolescent and paternal warmth, and less adolescents and paternal hostility. Adolescent aggressiveness was associated with less adolescent and paternal warmth, and more hostility. There was, finally, a significant actor effect of surgency predicting warmth, however this only emerged in 7th grade. Overall, effects were small to moderate in size (β s ranged from $|.19|$ to $|.26|$). The one gender difference that emerged suggested that girls', but not boys', negative affectivity was related to less youth ($\beta = -.56$) and paternal ($\beta = -.51$) hostility.

Discussion

The current study evaluated actor and partner effects of personality traits on observed behaviors during parent-child interactions in Mexican-origin families. Findings provide further support for the relevance of personality attributes when considering family processes in early adolescence given that observed interactions helps to alleviate concerns with mono-method designs. The present findings regarding parent personality and parenting converge with Prinzie and colleagues' (2009) meta-analysis, with most of the observed effect sizes falling within or near the meta-analytic 95% confidence intervals in their report. Although some effect sizes in the current report were slightly below this range, the Prinzie et al., (2009) meta-analysis suggests that these effects are smaller with older children, like those in this study. Furthermore, the present results regarding adolescent personality dovetail with past dyadic work with younger children (e.g., Wilson & Durbin, 2012) showing that child temperament is associated with both actor and partner effects, especially traits such as effortful control and aggressiveness, whereas parent personality is largely associated with actor effects.

The current results also show that associations observed in samples of younger, European/European-American families generalize to early adolescence, and families of Mexican origin. This overlap, as well as the general lack of observed gender differences across adolescent boys and girls, highlights the potential generalities of these effects, even when there may be cultural forces that could theoretically press for differentiated effects by gender or culture. Furthermore, our results suggest that previously identified patterns using survey methods also emerge when relationship behaviors are directly observed and coded. Thus, the current report hints at similarities in family processes (at least with respect to the variables we studied) across method, population type, and gender of the child.

Despite the strengths of this study, there are several limitations. Although a large amount of observational data was available across two time points, the parent-child interactions were only 20 minutes in length. Furthermore, a few of the personality scales (particularly surgency) demonstrated weak internal consistency, potentially rendering some results less informative because of attenuation due to measurement error. Finally, although the inclusion of fathers was a strength of this study, fewer fathers participated than mothers, which may have made it harder to detect effects for father-adolescent interactions due to diminished statistical power.

Conclusion

The current study further illuminates how personality traits manifest themselves behaviorally in interpersonal situations, and highlights the bidirectional nature of parent-child interactions. Findings suggest a role for adolescents' own dispositional characteristics in contributing to both their behavior towards their parents, and their parents' behavior towards them. Notably, effortful control and aggressiveness were the traits that most strongly predicted youth and parent behaviors when compared to other broad temperamental dimensions. These results add to the growing body of literature demonstrating the

importance of considering temperament and personality as contributors to youth adjustment (e.g., Clark et al., 2015).

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by a grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (DA017902) to Richard W. Robins and Rand D. Conger. We thank the participating families, staff, and research assistants who took part in this study.

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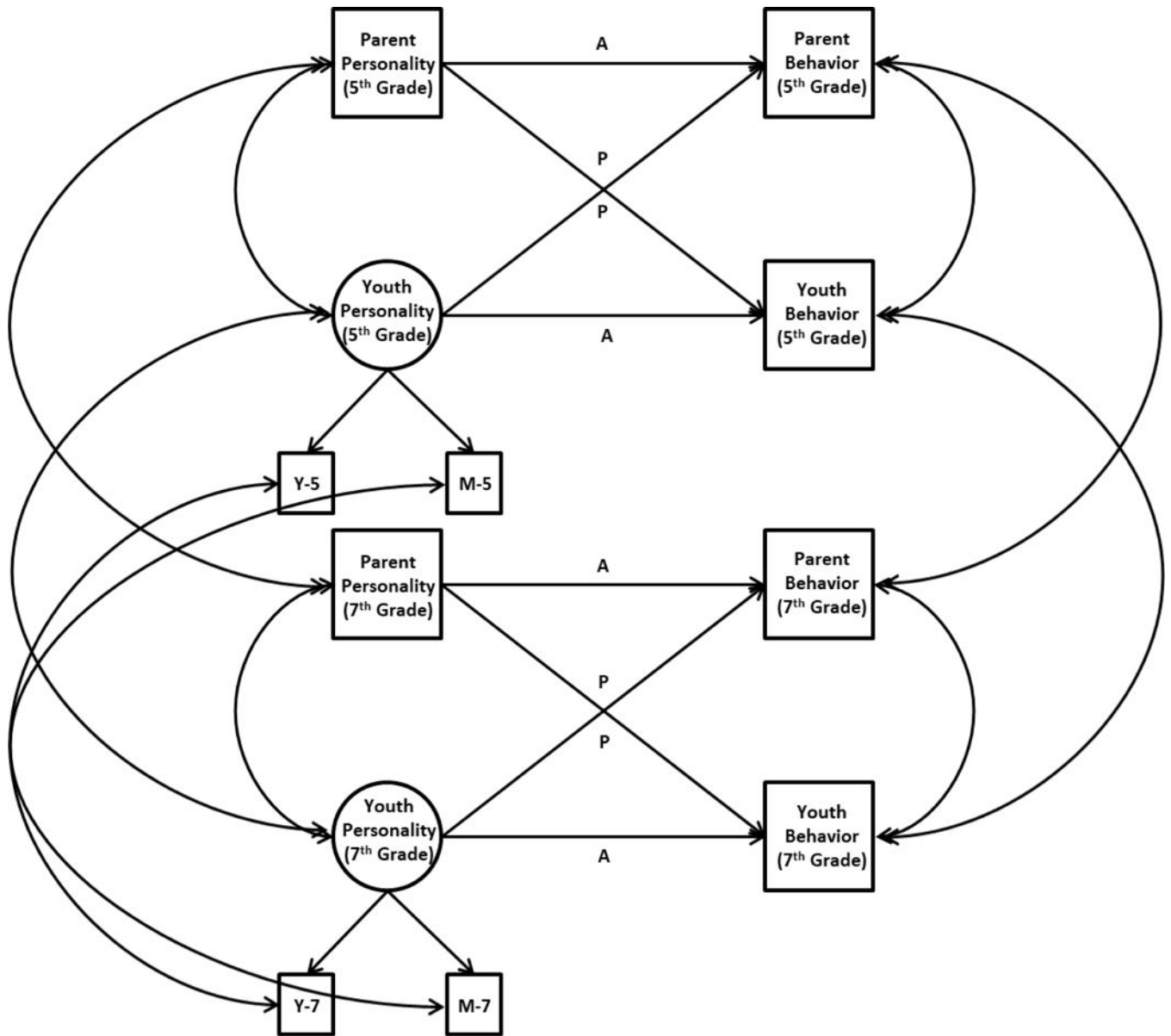


Figure 1. Stacked Actor-Partner Interdependence Model. A = actor effect paths; P = partner effect paths; Y-5 = youth 5th grade self-reports of temperament; M-5 = maternal 5th reports of youth temperament; Y-7 = youth 7th grade self-reports of temperament; M-7 = maternal 7th reports of youth temperament.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics at Grades 5 and 7

Trait	Mother (5 th Grade)		Mother (7 th Grade)		Father (5 th Grade)		Father (7 th Grade)		r
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Extraversion	2.84	.39	2.84	.38	2.83	.36	2.88	.33	.49
Neuroticism	2.34	.39	2.29	.44	2.17	.39	2.16	.38	.40
Conscientiousness	3.03	.34	3.07	.36	3.09	.33	3.12	.34	.50
Agreeableness	3.08	.33	3.14	.35	3.09	.32	3.16	.33	.58
Observed Warmth	4.46	1.08	4.23	1.01	4.01	1.09	3.95	.98	.41
Observed Hostility	2.42	.75	2.85	1.04	2.15	.64	2.57	1.00	.44

Trait	Adolescent (M; 5 th Grade)		Adolescent (M; 7 th Grade)		Adolescent (S; 5 th Grade)		Adolescent (S; 7 th Grade)		r
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Surgency	2.55	.50	2.55	.55	2.51	.47	2.57	.50	.17
Negative Affectivity	2.55	.48	2.44	.48	2.66	.50	2.27	.50	.45
Effortful Control	2.93	.44	2.81	.35	2.99	.38	2.87	.32	.30
Aggressiveness	1.44	.51	1.42	.53	1.41	.49	1.39	.46	.36
Observed Warmth	4.06	.97	3.97	.90	4.09	.86	1.94	.70	.34
Observed Hostility	2.00	.87	2.43	1.08	3.96	.94	2.09	.86	.40

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; r = correlation between grade 5 and grade 7 scores; Adolescent (M) = mother reported adolescent temperament; Adolescent (S) = self-reported adolescent temperament. Observed behavior descriptive statistics represent target's behavior towards partner. Adolescent behavior towards mothers in maternal report columns, adolescent behavior towards father in self-report columns.

Table 2

Actor Partner Interdependence Models for Adolescent-Parent Interactions

	Paths From Youth Personality From Sessions With Mother		Paths From Youth Personality From Sessions With Mother		Paths From Maternal Personality From Sessions With Youth		Paths From Paternal Personality From Sessions With Youth	
	Actor	Partner	Actor	Partner	Actor	Partner	Actor	Partner
Observed Warmth								
Extraversion/Surgency	-.01	.00	-.14(.19*)	-.10(-.06)	.15*	.07*	.11*(.13*)	.01(.13*)
Neuroticism/NA	.10	-.11	.13	-.11	-.13*	-.08*	-.06	-.05
Conscientiousness/EC	.34*	.33*	.26*	.19*	.05	.01	.09*	.02
Agreeableness/Aggression	-.31*	-.32*	-.28*	-.22*	.08*	-.01	.04	-.02
Observed Hostility								
Extraversion/Surgency	.01	.10	.04	.12	.03	-.05	.01	-.03
Neuroticism/NA	-.45*	-.40*	-.05	-.06	.15*	.14*	-.02	-.003
Conscientiousness/EC	-.28*	-.26*	-.24*	-.26*	.02	.03	.00	-.09*
Agreeableness/Aggression	.43*	.47*	.17*	.19*	.03	.00	-.02	.00

Note. Standardized regression weights presented. Regression weights in parentheses denote 7th grade values (outside of parentheses denotes 5th grade values) if there were differences across time.

* = $p < .05$.