It Takes Two to Tango
Teen Internalizing and Externalizing Problems Are Predicted by the Interaction of Parent and Teen Behaviors

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We know a bit about main effects
Adolescents’ internalizing problems are associated with...
- Parent behaviors:
  - lack of support
  - psychological control – disrespect
  - likely also overcontrol
- Adolescent behaviors:
  - secrecy
  - likely also lack of disclosure

Adolescents’ externalizing problems are associated with...
- Parent behaviors:
  - lack of behavioral control (but only to small extent & if not feeling overly controlled)
  - overcontrol
  - psychological control – disrespect
  - lack of support? (mixed findings)
- Adolescent behaviors:
  - secrecy
  - disclosure

But we know less about interaction effects
- We are aware of only one study that explored the interplay of these parent and adolescent behaviors
  - Adolescent disclosure and low delinquency more strongly associated if parents highly supportive (Keijsers et al., 2009)
- Systematic study of interactions between main predictors of internalizing and externalizing problems is lacking

Plan of study
- “Dependent” variables
  - Internalizing problems: depressive symptoms, loneliness, low self-esteem
  - Externalizing problems: delinquency, aggression, drug/alcohol use
- Parent “predictors”
  - support
  - psychological control – disrespect
  - behavior control
  - overcontrol
- Child “predictors”
  - secrecy
- And, of course, the parent x child interaction
  - Hypothesis: The 2 (child) x 4 (parent) x 6 (dependent variables) = 48 effects will vary.
Sample and Procedure

- N = 1,281. First wave of longitudinal study.
- Selected schools in a town of 36,000 and two nearby villages
- Grades 7-10 (age about 13-17, M = 15.2, SD = 1.2)
- 51.4% girls
- 3/5 native Swedes, 1/5 Sweden-born to immigrant parents, 1/5 foreign-born
- Majority of immigrants from other European countries or the Middle East
- Adolescents filled out questionnaires at school.

Main Effects

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Internalizing</th>
<th>Externalizing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>Psych. Ctrl.</td>
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<td>Overcontrl.</td>
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<td>Disclosure</td>
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<td>Secrecy</td>
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* a Spurious in combination with support
  b Spurious in combination with secrecy

Interaction Effects

- 13 of 48 interaction effects significant at $p < .05$ (which itself is significant at $p < .001$)
- Visual inspection: Very different interaction effects...
- Significant interaction effects can be summarized into 5 patterns

Patterns 1 & 2: Mutually Enhancing and Mutually Exacerbating

- Mutually enhancing: 2 positive behaviors
- Mutually exacerbating: 2 negative behaviors
- Strongest associations with problems if combined
Pattern 3: Protective Effect

Patterns 4 & 5: Relationship Split and Sabotage

Where do we find these effects?

- In order to find a systematic pattern, we should not just look at those interaction effects that happen to be significant. Rather, look at all 48 interaction effects, taking effect size into account.
- ANOVA of all 48 $r$ values of interaction effects, dependent of
  - prediction of internalizing vs. externalizing
  - 4 parental behaviors
  - 2 child behaviors
- $r$ values explained by combination of parent x child behaviors ($\eta^2 = .26$), moderated by internalizing vs. externalizing ($\eta^2 = .38$)

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<td>Mutually enhancing:</td>
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<td>Sabotage: Self-</td>
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<td>split: Self-esteem</td>
<td>Aggression</td>
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<td>Protection: Delinquency</td>
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*These three effects not consistent across kinds of externalizing*

May be vicious circles of child externalizing and secrecy, and parents’ controlling and aversive behaviors, each making the other worse

Disclosing children might accept more control, thereby being less affected by it.

Secretive children’s internalizing less associated with parental behaviors \(\Rightarrow\) Less parental influence? Less influence on parents?

Disclosing might open up for beneficial effects of support. Or, “depressed talk” diminishes support.
Conclusions

- Cross-sectional study does not allow for final causal conclusions
- But ample evidence for need to look at the combinations of parents' and children's behaviors when studying internalizing and externalizing behaviors
- How parents' and children's behaviors interact depends on the respective behaviors and the kind of problem behavior
- Important hypotheses generated by this study
  - Secrecy creates a distance in the parent-adolescent relationship so that associations between parenting and internalizing are weakened.
  - But secrecy, aversive and controlling parenting, and externalizing problems might exacerbate each other (see also Hawk et al., 2013).
  - Disclosure might indicate an openness to parental control, even in its more extreme forms ⇒ less aversive effects of control and overcontrol.

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