Implicit Attitudes toward Children May Be Unrelated to Child Abuse Risk

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Overview of Presentation

- Introduction: Social information processing
- Method: Experiments 1 & 2
- Hypotheses & Research Questions paired with Results
- Discussion

Social Information Processing

- The Social Information Processing (SIP) model of physically abusive parenting provides a framework for describing the role of cognitive processes in physically abusive parenting behavior.

(e.g., Azar, 1989; Bugental, 1989; Crouch & Milner, 2005; Dodge & Crick, 1990; Milner, 2000).

Development of Schemata

- Repeated experiences with child-related stimuli contribute to the development of parenting knowledge structures called schemata.

- Schemata can develop for many aspects of parenting, including parent-child interaction scripts and knowledge about child attributes or characteristics.
Schemata Storage & Use

- Schemata are stored in memory; and when activated, these knowledge structures influence subsequent information processing.

(e.g., Azar, 1989; Bugental, 1989; Crouch & Milner, 2005; Dodge & Crick, 1990; Milner, 2000).

SIP & Parenting Behavior

- Knowledge structure content and subsequent schema-driven information processing may contribute to abusive parenting behavior.

- The belief that children are hostile might distort interpretations of neutral child behavior. Such interpretations might be one factor contributing to punishment for innocuous behavior, which could escalate into child abuse.

(e.g., Milner, 2000)

Support for Hostility Schema

- High CPA risk parents rated ambiguous pictures of children as more hostile and difficult.

- The risk effect increased when parents were primed with a hostility-related word.

(Farc, Crouch, Skowronski, Milner, 2008)

Statement of the Problem

- It is not clear whether the effects reported by Farc et al. are due to beliefs about children (the semantic component of attitudes) or to evaluative reactions to children.

- One possibility is that parents who are high in CPA risk are especially likely to have developed cognitive structures that contain the default belief that children are hostile and difficult.

- A second possibility, though, is that parents who are high in CPA risk are especially likely to negatively evaluate children.
Statement of the Problem

- Research in social cognition has demonstrated that evaluative knowledge structures can be automatically activated by the mere presentation of target photographs of faces that represent some attitude object.

(e.g., Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995).

Statement of the Problem

- Because automatic information processing is thought to contribute to physically abusive parenting behavior, it may be informative to examine whether evaluative knowledge structures involving children can be automatically activated by the presentation of photographs of child faces (e.g., Crouch & Milner, 2005; Milner, 2000).

Purpose

- The purpose of the present study was to explore automatically activated evaluations that participants at low-, moderate-, and high-risk for CPA might have in response to photographs of child faces.

Method

Experiment 1
Participants

- 90 Undergraduate students
  - Female (60%) & Male (40%)
  - Mean age 19 years
  - Ethnicity:
    - Caucasian (61%)
    - African-American (17%)
    - Hispanic/Latino (12%)
    - Asian-American (3%)
    - Other (6%)

- 95 Mothers & Fathers
  - Female (65%) & Male (35%)
  - Mean age 32 years
  - Mean income reported: $26,740.38
  - Mean years of education: 13.5 years
  - Median of 2.0 children living in the home
  - Ethnicity:
    - Caucasian (54%)
    - African-American (34%)
    - Hispanic/Latino (6%)
    - Other (6%)

Method

- Experiment 2

Measures/Stimulus Materials

- Demographic questionnaire
- Child Abuse Potential Inventory (CAP)
- Positive & negative adjectives
- Child and adult digital photographs
  - 60 priming trial pictures
    - 30 children & 30 adults
    - 20 positive, 20 neutral/ambiguous, 20 negative
**Procedure**

- Practice Experimental block: 15 practice child faces & 15 practice adult faces preceded the presentation of the practice adjectives.
- 4 Experimental blocks: Over the course of the 4 blocks, each photograph was paired with 2 positive and 2 negative adjectives.
Procedure

- Each photograph was selected randomly without replacement and displayed on the computer screen.
- Individual adjectives were randomly selected without replacement and displayed on the computer screen.
- Participants were instructed to press the Z key if the adjective was “good” and press the M key if the adjective was “bad”
- Responses and reaction times were recorded in the Excel response file.
Procedure

- Demographic questionnaire
- CAP Inventory
- Debriefed: How people process information about children and adults
- Students credit towards course completion
- Parents $25.00
Procedure

- Incorrect responses and outliers (less than 100ms and greater than 5,000ms) were removed.
- Remaining RTs were used in analyses.

Results

Results were analyzed using a 3 (Risk: High, Moderate, Low) x 2 (Adjective: Positive, Negative) x 2 (Face Type: Child, Adult) x 3 (Face Valence: Positive, Neutral, Negative) with repeated measures on the last three factors. Simple effects were calculated by hand using the Newman-Keuls procedure for repeated measures.

Adjective x Face Valence

- Response latencies will be shorter for positive adjectives when they are preceded by smiling, relative to frowning/grimacing, faces.
- Response latencies will be shorter for negative adjectives when they are preceded by frowning or grimacing, relative to smiling, faces.
If high-risk, relative to moderate-, and low-risk, parents hold more negative attitudes toward children, than adults, RLs should be shortest for negative adjectives preceded by a child face.

If low-risk, relative to moderate-, and high-risk, parents hold more positive attitudes toward children, than adults, RLs should be shortest for positive adjectives preceded by a child face.

If participants, regardless of risk, hold more negative attitudes toward children, relative to adults, parents' RLs to negative adjectives should be shorter when preceded by faces of children, relative to adults.

### Adjective X Face Type

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
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<td>Adult</td>
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### Students

$F(1, 86) = 7.32, p < .01$, 
partial $\eta^2 = .078$

### Parents

$F(1, 90) = 4.14, p = .045$, 
partial $\eta^2 = .044$
The primary goal of our studies was to better understand the mechanisms driving results that suggest parents high in CPA risk were especially likely to rate neutral faces of children as hostile and difficult.

Specifically, we wanted to know if the mechanism behind the Farc et al. (2008) results was due to semantic related knowledge or negative evaluative reactions.

Results of the current study suggest that participants had more negative evaluative reactions to child faces, relative to adult faces. Taken together the results suggest that the automatic negative evaluations are due to in-group effects rather than risk group effects.

Collectively, results from our studies are consistent with the possibility that there may be widespread implicit (without intention or outside awareness) out-group bias against children among adults in our samples.
Discussion

- Although all adults in our studies demonstrated negative evaluative biases with respect to children, it remains possible that high and low CPA risk parents may differ in how they manage this initial negative evaluative reaction.

Limitations

- Although measurement of CPA risk using the CAP has been found to be a valid proxy for abuse risk, it is not equivalent to assessing actual abusive care giving behavior.
- The stimuli used in the present studies were children who were unknown to the participants; it is an open question whether similar results would be obtained when the priming stimulus is a parent’s own child.

Limitations

- CPA risk might be related to implicit evaluative reactions to children in specific contexts or in response to particular goals. One possibility is that CPA risk status could moderate reactions to unmet goals. For example, high risk caregivers may experience more negative evaluative biases in response to perceptions of certain child characteristics (e.g., power; Bugental, 1992, 1993) or aspects of the context (e.g., child transgressions; Ateah & Durrant, 2005).

Future Directions

- Future research can examine each of these possibilities by designing studies to activate parenting goals. If risk does not moderate aspects of parenting goals, or the status of goals, one could then manipulate the success of recently completed goals to examine whether failure of goal attainment moderates the relationship between risk and implicit evaluative reactions to children.