

Are Discrepancies in Perceptions of Family Functioning between Youth and Their Mothers Related to Youth Externalizing Problems?

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine whether youth-parent discrepancies in perceptions of the family predict later youth psychological adjustment (as indicated by youth and mother reports of youth externalizing problems) and/or whether youth psychological adjustment predicts later youth-parent discrepancies in perceptions of the family. Surveys were administered to 125 15-20 year old youth and their mothers during the spring of 2007 (Time 1) and 2008 (Time 2). SEM results indicated that greater discrepancies in youth-mother perceptions of the family predicted higher levels of adolescent externalizing symptomatology. In contrast, higher levels of externalizing symptomatology did not predict later discrepancies in youth-mother perceptions of the family. These findings highlight the importance of taking both directions of effect into consideration when examining the family and youth psychological adjustment.

Sample

- 125 youth (56% girls; 75% Caucasian) and their mothers from the Adolescent Adjustment Project (AAP)
- Adolescents' mean age = 15.98 (SD=.70)
- All participants attended a public high school in Delaware, Pennsylvania, or Maryland and were in the 10th or 11th grade at Time 1

Measures

The Family Satisfaction Scale (FSS; Olson & Wilson, 1982) was completed by the youth and their mothers to assess their satisfaction with the family. The FSS includes 14 items. A representative FSS item is "How satisfied are you with how close you feel to the rest of your family?" Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 = *dissatisfied* to 5 = *extremely satisfied*. Separate total FSS scores were calculated for youth ($\alpha = .90$) and mothers ($\alpha = .83$).

The Adolescent-Parent Communication Scale (Barnes & Olson, 2003) was used to measure communication between youth and their mothers. This 20-item measure includes two subscales – open family communication and problems in communication. A sample item is "There are topics I avoid discussing with my mother/child". The participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Separate scale scores were calculated for youth and their mothers. Cronbach alpha coefficients ranged from .78 to .92.

Measures

Alcohol and Drug Use Questionnaire Youth were asked to report how much, on the average day, they usually drank (beer, wine, or liquor) in the last six months (separate questions were used for beer, wine, and liquor). The response scale ranged from 0 = *none* to 9 = *more than 8 drinks*. In addition, they were asked to report how often they usually had a drink (beer, wine, or liquor) in the last six months on a scale ranging from 0 = *never* to 7 = *every day*. Based on this information, a total alcohol quantity x frequency score was calculated. Youth also were asked how many times they had 6 or more drinks in the past six months.

In order to assess drug use, youth were asked how frequently they had used marijuana, sedatives, stimulants, inhalants, hallucinogens, cocaine or crack, and opiates (non-medical use only) in the last 6 months. The response scale ranged from 0 = *no use* to 7 = *every day*. A total drug use score was calculated by summing the scores of the different types of drugs. Because the substance use scores were skewed, the logarithmic transformation of these scores were used.

The Child Behavior Checklist (CBC; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001) was used to obtain mothers' reports of their child's problem behaviors. The CBC includes 113 items. Parents are presented with a list of problems and are asked to state whether each problem is 0 = *not true*, 1 = *somewhat or sometimes true*, or 2 = *very true or often true* for their child. Sample items are "fearful, anxious" and "enjoys little". The CBC scales used in this study were Aggressive Behavior ($\alpha = .85$) and Rule Breaking Behavior ($\alpha = .81$).

Procedures

During the spring of 2007 and 2008, youth who provided assent, and who had parental consent, were administered a self-report survey in school by trained research personnel. The survey took approximately 40 minutes to complete. Upon completion of the survey, participants were given a movie pass. Mothers were mailed a similar survey to complete and were sent a \$20 gift card upon receipt of their completed survey.

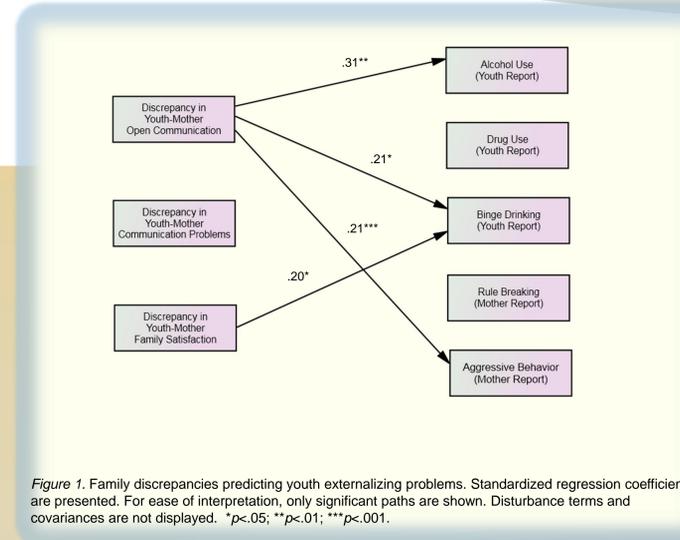


Figure 1. Family discrepancies predicting youth externalizing problems. Standardized regression coefficients are presented. For ease of interpretation, only significant paths are shown. Disturbance terms and covariances are not displayed. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Results

Prior to the primary analyses, discrepancy scores were calculated by subtracting the youth score from the mother score for the family measures (the absolute values of these scores were used). Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted to examine whether youth-mother discrepancies in perceptions of the family predicted youth externalizing problems one year later and/or whether externalizing problems predicted discrepancies in youth-mother perceptions of the family one year later.

Do Youth-Mother Discrepancies in Family Perceptions Predict Youth Externalizing Problems?

The model predicting youth externalizing problems from youth-mother discrepancies in family perceptions fit the data well ($X^2(10)=15.78$, $p=.11$; CFI=1.00; RMSEA=.02). Discrepancies in youth-mother perceptions of family satisfaction predicted youth reports of their binge drinking ($\beta=.20$, $p<.05$). In addition, discrepancies in youth-mother perceptions of open communication predicted youth reports of their own alcohol use ($\beta=.31$, $p<.01$) and binge drinking ($\beta=.21$, $p<.05$) and mothers' reports of youth aggressive behavior ($\beta=.21$, $p<.001$). These results indicate that greater discrepancies in youth-mother perceptions lead to higher levels of youth substance use and aggressive behavior.

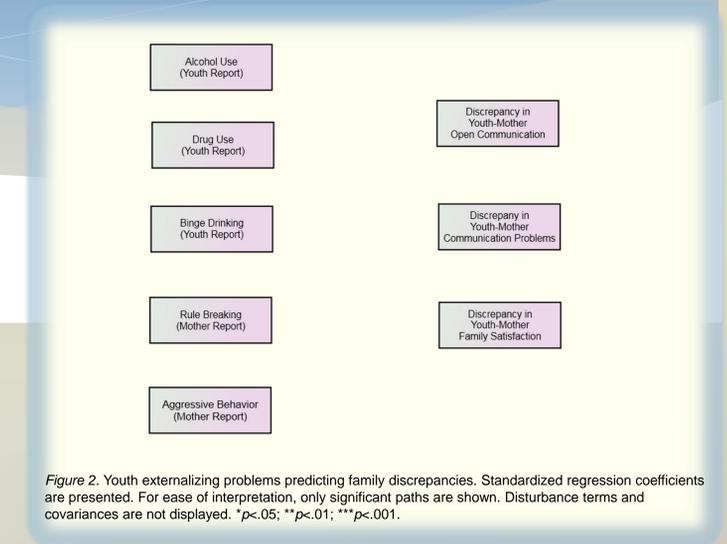


Figure 2. Youth externalizing problems predicting family discrepancies. Standardized regression coefficients are presented. For ease of interpretation, only significant paths are shown. Disturbance terms and covariances are not displayed. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Do Youth Externalizing Problems Predict Youth-Mother Discrepancies in Family Perceptions?

The model predicting youth-mother discrepancies in family perceptions from externalizing problems provided a good fit to the data ($X^2(15)=12.26$, $p=.66$; CFI=1.00; RMSEA=.00). However, in this model, none of the externalizing problems predicted discrepancies in perceptions of family satisfaction, open communication, or communication problems. These results suggest that higher levels of youth externalizing symptomatology do not lead to more discrepant perceptions of the family between youth and their mothers.

Conclusions

In the present study, discrepancies in youth-mother perceptions of the family predicted both youth and mother reports of youth externalizing problems one year later. These findings indicate that when youth perceptions of the family do not concur with their mother's perceptions of the family, youth are subsequently more likely to drink more heavily and behave more aggressively. In contrast, youth and mother reports of youth externalizing problems did not predict discrepancies in youth-mother perceptions of the family one year later. These findings highlight the importance of taking the perceptions of both young people and their parents into consideration. In addition, they emphasize the importance of examining both directions of influence involved in the relations between the family and youth psychological adjustment.