



Neighborhood, poverty, and negative behavior: An examination of differential association and social control theory[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study applies differential association and social control theories to childhood negative behaviors. Using a path analysis model, relationships between poverty, neighborhood SES, and parenting are explored. Analyses suggest that decreases in rates of poverty and increases in neighborhood SES lead to decreased negative behaviors, and aggravation with parenting is the greatest predictor of negative behavior.

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1. Introduction

The literature on the causes and resulting consequences of negative behavior among adolescents is pervasive. The factors influencing negative behavior arising out of the family, the parents, and the community have all been addressed in some detail. However, the application of these findings to younger children at an earlier developmental stage is still relatively new. In focusing on younger children, this study builds upon the existing knowledge about the influence of poverty, neighborhood SES, parental stress and mastery, discipline, and aggravation in parenting on negative behavior. Using data from the Fragile Families Study, a hypothesized model was tested using a priori constructs consistent with the literature. The results demonstrate a causal effect of these phenomena on negative behavior in children. Social control and differential association theories are used to explain the findings presented in the discussion building a framework which links individual choice and environmental influence.

2. Background

The juvenile delinquency literature has identified causal links to negative behavior. Previous studies have provided evidence that early negative behavior in children leads to an increased likelihood of adult criminal behavior (Haynie, 2001; Patterson, DeBaryshe, &

Ramsey, 1989). There is research to support the connection between negative behavior and family and neighborhood factors, such as family stability, poverty and the availability of resources (Church, Wharton, & Taylor, 2009; Farrington, Jolliffe, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Kalb, 2001; Feldman & Gehring, 1988; Gove & Crutchfield, 1982; Loeber & Farrington, 2000). However, the majority of these studies have focused on adolescents with little attention given to younger children. Studies have largely focused upon school-age children in an effort to diagnose behavioral problems at the clinical level, which typically occur once the child has entered into elementary school.

In a study of early child risk factors, kindergarten children exhibiting high levels of hyperactivity and aggression were more likely to persist with aggression into elementary school (Stormont, 2000), which in turn leads to continued and sometimes exacerbated aggression in middle and high school. Another study suggested that disruptive behavior produced “significant attention difficulties and moderate elevations of depression” as well as the behavior externalization of aggression and hyperactivity (Beg, Casey, & Saunders, 2001, p. 126). Findings also suggested that the preschool period is a critical time in which behaviors emerge, potentially developing a pathway toward difficulties into middle and late childhood. The earlier attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder can be diagnosed; the less difficult prevention efforts at the onset of negative association of aggression and self-esteem become (Byrne, DeWolfe, & Banda, 1998; Smith & Corkum, 2007; Thompson & Tabone, 2010). Although it may be difficult to predict which children will exhibit behavior problems into elementary school, early behaviors that are disruptive elevate the risk of persistent problems in the home and school

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(Fagot & Leve, 1998; Pierce, Ewing, & Campbell, 1999). Therefore, the importance of prevention efforts regarding behavior problems should begin well before school age (Beg et al., 2001).

The extant literature has also examined the use of parental discipline and the effect of childhood behavior. Parental discipline has been shown to have a direct relationship with hostility in children that later contributed to conduct problems at home and school (Snyder, Cramer, Afrank, & Patterson, 2005). Parental discipline can directly affect conduct problems in children in the home as well as the neighborhood and school in which the family resides (Snyder, Edwards, McGraw, Kilgore, & Holton, 1994; Snyder & Patterson, 1995). It has been found that parents who have a lower SES are more likely to be controlling of children's behavior, use physical discipline, or exhibit authoritarian parenting styles (Patterson et al., 1989). Negative outbursts and acting out were lower over time when parental support and monitoring occurred in contrast to ineffective discipline practices, which are associated with the risk of developing antisocial traits in childhood, which lead to exhibited negative behavior earlier in life (Barnes & Farrel, 1992; Patterson et al., 1989). Patterson et al. (1989) argue that family structure is not the major variable of consequence; they argue that it is actually disruption of parental practices that are more causally related to antisocial behavior.

Ineffective parenting skills or adults who parent with poor social skills increase the likelihood that children will learn maladaptive behaviors and inappropriate social skills. As such, this can lead to negative behaviors and ultimately delinquency from early onset into adolescence. Family stressors common in families of lower socioeconomic status, such as unemployment or income instability and higher rates of family violence, may increase the likelihood of poor parenting practices (Beck, Cooper, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010; Levanthal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Thus, parental efficacy is a significant precondition for self-control in children. Edwards and Bromfield (2009) found in their study that parents' sense of belonging in the neighborhood was directly associated with whether they viewed their preschool child as exemplifying characteristics of consideration and helpfulness to others or more likely to exhibit problem behaviors such as lying, fighting, or having temper tantrums. Parental stressors include a range of factors such as the frequency of positive and negative family interaction, and the ability of family groups to cope with various life stressors. There is some evidence that ineffective parenting skills or parenting by adults who themselves have poor social skills may increase the likelihood that children in the home will learn maladaptive behaviors and inappropriate social skills.

The result of a mothers' dual role as a caregiver as well as access to social and economic resources causes increased stress in child rearing (Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). One study demonstrated that the number of co-residential transitions a mother experienced between the birth of her child and age five is directly associated with higher levels of parenting stress (Beck et al., 2010). In a similar vein, Waldoff (2002) suggests that neighborhood attachment is linked to local neighborhood stressors, which could include parenting. Poor neighborhood conditions negate feelings, thoughts, and behaviors diminishing commitment to one's neighborhood and ability to thrive (Waldoff, 2002). As such, the economic and social role that parents model influences the attitudes and future expectations of children.

Research exploring neighborhood context and effects warrants further attention as it relates to early child behavior outcomes (Bolland & McCallum, 2002; Coulton, 2005; Kling & Liebman, 2007; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002). In a review of neighborhood effects literature, children age five to six living in low income neighborhoods or low SES neighborhoods exhibited increased amounts of externalizing behavior problems (Chase-Lansdale, Gordon, Brooks-Gunn, & Klevanov, 1997; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klevanov, & Sealand, 1993; Levanthal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Additionally, Levanthal and Brooks-Gunn (2000)

found in their review of neighborhood effects a causal link between neighborhood SES and residential stability in relation to achievement, behavior problems, juvenile delinquency, with SES having the greatest effect.

Klevanov, Brooks-Gunn, Chase-Lansdale, and Gordon (1997) have demonstrated that a concentrated disadvantage, low income levels, and residential in-stability are significant risk factors to healthy parenting practices as well as overall well-being within the neighborhood (Sampson et al., 2002). Much research has shown that children reared in single parent households, particularly female-headed households, do not fare as well as those raised in a two parent household. Carlson and Corcoran (2001) found that children born to a single parent had more behavioral problems, particularly those children born in low SES neighborhoods. Single mothers oftentimes have less time to spend with their children and intangible resources such as parenting quality and parental mental health are often lacking.

2.1. Theoretical linkages of social control and differential association

Jenks and Mayer (1990) suggest that neighborhood characteristics may matter with regard to how they affect child development through taxonomy encompassing epidemic theories, collective socialization, institutional models, competition models, and relative deprivation. Differential association and social control theories can be utilized in understanding parental discipline and its effects on early child development. The theoretical linkages of differential association and social control were explored in a similar fashion to Church et al.'s (2009) testing of these theories in their study of family systems and delinquency. Snyder et al. (2005) assert that transitioning to elementary school is an "important juncture for the continuity of conduct problems" (p. 31). Therefore, parental aggravation and discipline can have a direct effect on school conduct problems during preschool and elementary grades (Nix et al., 1999). As such, the theoretical linkages of differential association and social control are utilized to explore parental discipline and its effects upon early childhood behavioral problems.

According to differential association, negative behavior is learned through interaction with others and these interactions are formed through social and cultural transmission. These factors begin to take form when a child is young and therefore as a child ages negative behavior is thought to be less socially taxing. Hirschi's (2002) theory of social control proposes that individuals have the freedom to commit delinquent acts as an individual's ties to "conventional order" within society have been broken (p. 3). Social control theory asserts that as group norms are violated, negative behavior/delinquency occurs (Colvin & Pauly, 1983; Hagan, 1989; Hoffmann, 2002). With the violation of group norms, low levels of parental control and family cohesion contribute to the inability of parents to effectively discipline poor behavior in early childhood and subsequently as the child ages.

Differential association and social control theory show the importance of familial cohesion, parental stressors, parental discipline, and neighborhood environment in the development of pro-social behavior in deterring negative behavior. Hirschi (2002) utilizes a cultural deviance perspective from the belief that youth who have no attachment to their parents or a significant relationship with another adult are exposed at a higher rate to "criminogenic influences" leading to deviant opportunities (p. 85). As such, familial cohesion is related to mechanisms of social support as well as theories pointing to the effects of parental support on child outcomes (Barnes, 1990; Barnes, Farrell, & Cairns, 1986; Church et al., 2009; Cohen & Willis, 1985; Farrell & Barnes, 1993; Peterson & Rollins, 1987; Rollins & Thomas, 1979). Farrell and Barnes (1993) assert that the more cohesive the family, the greater likelihood that communication, individual

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