



Parental monitoring, personality, and delinquency: Further support for a reconceptualization of monitoring

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ABSTRACT

Stattin and Kerr [Stattin, H., & Kerr, M. (2000). Parental monitoring: A reinterpretation. *Child Development*, 71(4), 1072–1085] suggested reconceptualizing “parental monitoring” and presented evidence from a Swedish sample that challenged current operational definitions. We replicate and extend their findings. Parental knowledge (“monitoring”) related more strongly to child disclosure than to parental solicitation of information in a more ethnically-diverse U.S. sample. We then addressed whether adolescents’ personalities accounted for the links between child disclosure, parental knowledge, and delinquency. Solicitation, knowledge, and disclosure generally did not predict delinquency when controlling for adolescent personality. Personality contributed significant incremental validity to the statistical prediction of delinquency above and beyond solicitation, knowledge, and disclosure; the reverse was generally not true. Adolescents’ personalities largely account for the “parental monitoring”–delinquency association, which supports reconceptualizing monitoring.

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1. Introduction

Researchers have long sought to understand juvenile delinquency because of its very clear social costs (Foster, Jones, & Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2006). One approach to understanding delinquency focuses on parenting behaviors, which are commonly labeled “monitoring.” Recently, however, there has been a call to reconceptualize the way the parental monitoring construct is operationally defined, and evidence has been presented in support of this argument (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). A second approach to understanding delinquency utilizes measures of personality (e.g., Krueger, Schmutte, Caspi, Moffitt, Campbell, & Silva, 1994; Miller & Lynam, 2001, 2003). To our knowledge, these two lines of research—parental monitoring and personality—have not yet been integrated.

In the current study, we pursue this integration. A synthesis of the parental monitoring and personality approaches to understanding delinquency is needed because both monitoring and personality are well-known correlates of delinquency, but we lack an understanding of how they work together. Does the previous evidence supporting a reconceptualization of parental monitoring replicate in an ethnically-diverse U.S. sample? Are parental monitoring (and other related parent and adolescent behaviors

discussed in the literature) and personality traits independent constructs or are they systematically related? If they are indeed related, what are the implications for the proposed reconceptualization of parental monitoring? We begin by reviewing parental monitoring and then discuss what is known about the prediction of delinquency by parental monitoring and personality separately.

1.1. The parental monitoring construct

Although parental monitoring has been linked to various forms of delinquency in the empirical literature (e.g., Biglan, Duncan, Ary, & Smolkowski, 1995; Dishion, Capaldi, Spracklen, & Li, 1995; Metzler, Noell, Biglan, Ary, & Smolkowski, 1994), the exact nature and meaning of the parental monitoring construct and related measures has come under close scrutiny in recent years. Dishion and McMahon (1998) defined parental monitoring in terms of “parenting behaviors involving attention to and track of the child’s whereabouts, activities, and adaptations” (p. 61). This conceptualization, which has been utilized by many researchers over the years, focuses on activities in which parents actively engage, such as tracking the child. However, as Stattin and Kerr (2000) note, the measures of parental monitoring utilized by researchers typically have assessed the amount of *knowledge* parents have about their children rather than the active parenting behaviors in the definition above. For instance, common items determine how much information a parent knows but not the process by which the

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parent discovered this information. Thus, the historical construct of “parental monitoring” might be better understood as “parental knowledge.”

1.2. The sources of parental knowledge

There are several means by which parental knowledge of their children's lives could be acquired. One possibility is that parents simply solicit information from their children. A second possibility is that parents set rules and boundaries with their children, and, through this control of their children, they obtain knowledge. For instance, if a parent does not allow a child to leave the house after sunset, the parent could respond positively to a “parental monitoring” questionnaire item such as “I know where my child is at night.” These knowledge-acquisition processes of parental solicitation and parental control both represent active parenting behaviors and thus seem congruent with the definition of parental monitoring given by Dishion and McMahon (1998). However, a third possibility exists by which parents could obtain information about their children's lives, which requires little to no activity on the part of the parent: child disclosure. It is possible that children simply tell their parents information about their lives, and, through this disclosure, parents learn more about their children (and thus increase their parental knowledge). These three processes—parental solicitation, parental control, and child disclosure—all represent means by which parents can possess knowledge about their children, although they differ with regard to how active (if at all) a parent must be to acquire the knowledge. Certainly, if a relatively parentally-passive means of obtaining information (i.e., child disclosure) serves as the major source of parental knowledge, the definition of “parental monitoring” as an active process, and potentially as a parenting behavior with causal implications for lessening delinquency, must be reevaluated, as was suggested by Stattin and Kerr (2000)¹.

A series of studies has recently examined the role of solicitation, control, and children disclosure in parents' acquisition of knowledge about their children. In one study, a large sample of 14-year-old Swedish adolescents and their parents completed measures of parental solicitation, control, and knowledge (the latter being akin to historical assessments of “parental monitoring”) as well as adolescent disclosure and normbreaking (Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Correlations of parental knowledge with solicitation, control, and disclosure in both child- and parent-report data revealed that parental knowledge showed markedly stronger associations with child disclosure than with either active parental behavior (i.e., solicitation or control), although all of these correlations were significant. The conclusion that parental knowledge is more strongly related to child disclosure than solicitation or control was bolstered further by hierarchical regression analyses, which indicated that adolescent disclosure alone predicted 44% of the variance in parental knowledge in child-report data (and 38% in parent-report), and the addition of solicitation and control to the regression model in a second step yielded a significant, but relatively quite small, increase in R^2 (3% increase in child-report and 5% increase in parent-report).

Additional research has investigated the importance of adolescent disclosure (e.g., Kerr, Stattin, & Trost, 1999). In one study, solicitation, control, disclosure, and adolescent delinquency data

for over 1000 Swedish 14-year-olds and their parents highlighted again the strong relation between child disclosure and parental knowledge (Kerr & Stattin, 2000). As in previous research, the correlation between disclosure and parental knowledge ($r = .70$ in child-report data, for instance) was markedly higher than the correlations between solicitation and knowledge ($r = .23$) and between control and knowledge ($r = .32$). Again, this research supports the notion that adolescents' free disclosure of information, rather than active parenting behaviors, is more strongly associated with the type of parental knowledge (i.e., “parental monitoring”) that has been linked previously to both positive and negative outcomes for children.

1.3. Solicitation, control, and disclosure predicting delinquency

Numerous studies have linked “parental monitoring” broadly conceived to delinquent behaviors. Youths who experience low levels of monitoring have been shown to have increased use of drugs and tobacco (Biglan et al., 1995; Fletcher, Darling, & Steinberg, 1995; Martins, Storr, Alexandre, & Chilcoat, 2008). Poorly monitored adolescents tend to have delinquent peers (Dishion et al., 1995). These youths also engage in risky sexual behaviors to a greater degree than their more monitored counterparts (Metzler et al., 1994).

As noted above, however, the “parental monitoring” measures that yielded many such findings seemingly assessed parental knowledge rather than active parenting behaviors. In addition, parental knowledge is more strongly related to child disclosure than parental efforts such as solicitation or control. These findings draw into question the exact nature of the association between “parental monitoring” and delinquency. For example, it might be that the link between parental knowledge and delinquency is accounted for largely by adolescent disclosure (seemingly the largest source of parental knowledge) and only minimally by parents themselves.

The links among active parenting behaviors of solicitation and control, the child behavior of disclosure, and adolescent delinquency have been investigated. Stattin and Kerr (2000) found that child disclosure alone predicted 15% of the variance in normbreaking; the addition of solicitation and control to the regression model yielded a small increase in R^2 (3%). Similarly, another study regressed a wide variety of measures of child adjustment on solicitation, control, and child disclosure (Kerr & Stattin, 2000). Across these models, solicitation and control tended to have relatively small and typically non-significant effects in the statistical prediction of the adjustment variables, whereas child disclosure showed markedly stronger associations with better adjustment and was significant across all but one case. The results of these studies highlight the importance of child disclosure, not only as the prime source of parental knowledge, but also as a stronger predictor of delinquency than the active parenting behaviors of solicitation and control.

1.4. Toward a reconceptualization of parental monitoring

These studies indicate that for Swedish adolescents and their parents, child disclosure relates more strongly to parental knowledge than does either parental solicitation or control. In addition, it is adolescent disclosure that appears to drive the historical association between “parental monitoring” (typically measures of parental knowledge) and delinquency. Such findings have prompted Stattin and Kerr (2000) to call for a reconceptualization of parental monitoring. They suggest reserving the term “parental monitoring” for active parenting behaviors and paying increased attention to the reasons why parental knowledge is so strongly related to delinquency.

¹ This terminology not meant to imply that adaptive yet parentally-passive behaviors, such as spontaneous child disclosure of information, did not at least partially arise from active behaviors on the part of the parents at some point in the past. For example, although child disclosure is parentally-passive, the parent-child relationship dynamics that lead the child to disclose could have resulted from previous parentally-active behaviors (e.g., behavioral control; see Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Luyckx, & Goossens, 2006).

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