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Hostility ratings by parents at risk for child abuse: Impact of chronic and temporary schema activation

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Abstract

Objective: Two studies examined whether accessibility of hostility-related schema influenced ratings of ambiguous child pictures. Based on the social information processing model of child physical abuse (CPA), it was expected that CPA risk status would serve as a proxy for chronic accessibility of hostile schema, while priming procedures were used to manipulate temporary accessibility of hostility-related schema.

Methods: Participants included 108 parents (79 low and 29 high CPA risk) in Experiment 1 and 88 parents (43 low and 45 high CPA risk) in Experiment 2. Parents were randomly assigned to either hostile or neutral priming conditions. Following the priming procedures, all parents rated pictures that depicted children who appeared ambiguous with regard to the extent to which they were being hostile/cooperative.

Results: In both experiments, high, compared to low, CPA risk parents rated the ambiguous child pictures as more hostile. Further, both supraliminal (Experiment 1) and subliminal (Experiment 2) exposure to hostility-related words independently increased hostility ratings. In both experiments, the influence of chronic and temporary activation of hostile schema was additive and not interactive.

Conclusion: Findings from these experiments are consistent with the proposition that high CPA risk parents are more likely to infer hostility in response to ambiguous child cues. Further, accessibility of hostility-related schema in parents increases the likelihood of hostile inferences, which in turn may increase attributions of hostile intent and aggressive parenting behaviors.

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Keywords: Child physical abuse; Schema; Hostility; Priming; Parenting

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Introduction

A wide array of factors has been implicated in the etiology of child physical abuse (CPA), including both psychological and sociological factors (for reviews see Azar & Wolfe, 2006; Milner & Crouch, 1999). According to psychological perspectives, characteristics within the abusive individual (e.g., depression, parenting beliefs) predispose them to behave aggressively toward their children. Sociological perspectives emphasize aspects of the social environment (e.g., stressors, lack of support) that contribute to the occurrence of CPA. Although neither perspective alone adequately explains the occurrence of CPA, the shortcomings of these earlier single factor approaches have fostered an appreciation of the dynamic interplay of both psychological and social forces in shaping parenting behavior.

As has been proposed previously (Crouch & Milner, 2005; Milner, 1993, 2000), information processing theory provides a framework for integrating psychological and social factors associated with the occurrence of abusive parenting behavior. According to information processing models, details of the social context are believed to become internalized as schemas within the developing individual. These internalized information structures influence subsequent perceptions, interpretations, and reactions across social contexts. Thus, through experience, a *psychological* context is created and consists of the individual's idiosyncratic perceptions, interpretations, and responses to the objective features of the social context.

Social Information Processing (SIP) model of CPA

The SIP model of CPA describes parental cognitive activities believed to impact risk of verbal and physical aggression directed at children (Milner, 1993, 2000, 2003a). The components of the model consist of pre-existing schemas, three cognitive processing stages, and a fourth cognitive/behavioral stage of response execution. The three cognitive components include perceptions of social behavior; interpretations and evaluations that give meaning to social behavior; and information integration and response selection activities. The fourth component involves response implementation and monitoring processes. Pre-existing schemas are thought to influence each component of the model, with automatic (i.e., high speed, rigid) and controlled (i.e., slower, flexible) processes used to describe the manner in which components of the model interact.

Pre-existing schemas. Pre-existing schemas represent stores of information based on past experience that prepare the individual to interpret and respond to future events. More specifically, pre-existing schemas are knowledge structures that contain generalized representations regarding the co-occurrence and/or sequencing of perceptions, interpretations, and behaviors. Schemas represent regularities in experience across time, capturing generalities or stereotypic representations of events.

The relative accessibility of a schema is believed to determine the extent to which it influences other information processing activities (e.g., interpretations, response selection). Schemas that are used frequently (vs. infrequently) are believed to be more accessible and more likely to influence subsequent processing. Given that many at-risk and abusive, compared to nonabusive, parents report past experiences of violence exposure, victimization, and/or perpetration of aggressive behavior, they are believed to have aggression-related schemas that are highly, and in some cases chronically, accessible (Milner, 1993, 2000, 2003a). Aggression-related schemas that are highly accessible are thought to result in perceptual biases that favor aggression-relevant stimuli, more frequent hostile interpretations of others, and/or increased aggressive behavior across situations. Chronically accessible schemas are believed to exert a

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