Contextual Factors Related to Family Management Strategies in
High Risk Environments

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INTRODUCTION

Much of the literature on family management strategies in early adolescence suggests that families that promote active involvement in family decision-making and are developmentally sensitive to the early adolescent's needs for autonomy promote better outcomes for the early adolescent (Steinberg, 1981; Eccles et al. in press). Most of the studies on family decision-making have used predominantly white, middle-class families. The primary purpose of the present study is to investigate family management strategies in a more diverse socioeconomic and racial sample. Specifically, the relationship between context and family management style will be addressed. It has been suggested that poor minority children may benefit from authoritarian strategies rather than authoritative strategies (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1989). We will address the suggestion that parents in high risk neighborhoods, (neighborhoods with high crime rates and drug use) who implement more controlling strategies will have children who show better outcomes such as less depression and less acting out behavior. Additionally, the importance of children's decision-making on outcomes will be dependent upon the risk of their neighborhood. Decision-making opportunities may be more predictive of children's positive outcomes in neighborhoods that have relatively fewer perceived risks. By taking the child's context into account we hope to expand the understanding of the impact of family socialization practices. Since the data are cross-sectional the direction of effect cannot be determined, however the present study is a starting point for understanding the relationship between family management strategies and child outcomes. We used data from the Philadelphia Family Management Study to explore this area of inquiry.

SUBJECTS

The subjects consisted of 489 randomly selected families in mainly low SES areas of Philadelphia. Approximately 65% of the families were black, 30% white and 5% other. A family consisted of a primary caretaker (usually the mother), a child between the ages of 11 and 14, and if available, an older sibling of the target child.

METHODS

Families were interviewed in the home by trained interviewers. The primary parent and the target child had both an interview and a self-administered questionnaire. The older sibling filled out a self-administered questionnaire. The interview and questionnaire asked a variety of open- and closed-ended questions concerning the resources in the neighborhood, dangers in the neighborhood, family management strategies, parent and child relationships, and parent and child mental health. Factor analyses were used to determine underlying constructs for both the family environment and child outcomes. Scales were created based on these factors. All scales used had an alpha of at least .60. Parent report of dangers in the neighborhood and race were used as contextual variables. Other demographic variables in the model were family income and gender of child. The interactions tested were between race and family strategy and between perception and family strategy. Multiple regression was used to test the following models:

1. CHILD OUTCOME=RACE + INCOME + CHILD'S GENDER + FAMILY STRATEGY + (RACE X FAMILY STRATEGY)

2. CHILD OUTCOME=RACE + INCOME + CHILD'S GENDER + PERCEPTION OF DANGER+ FAMILY STRATEGY + (PERCEPTION OF DANGER X FAMILY STRATEGY)
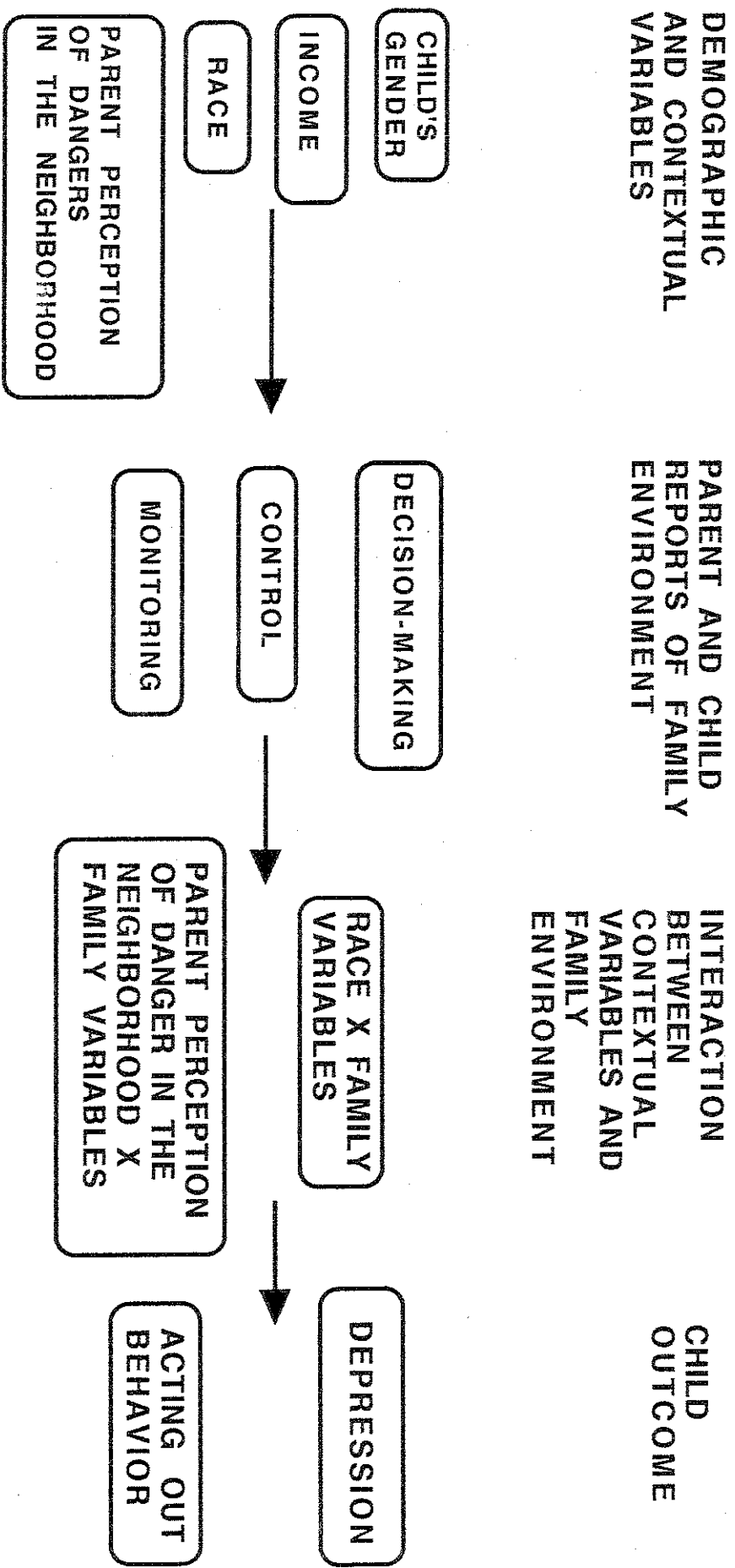
RESULTS

Preliminary analyses indicate that the relationships between family management strategies and child outcomes may depend on both race and perceived dangers in the neighborhood. Opportunities for child decision-making seem to be more important in reducing child's depression in less dangerous environments than in more dangerous environments. Increased opportunities for decision-making appear to have negative consequences-- more reports of children's acting out behavior-- for white children than black children. Black children whose parents use more controlling strategies report less depression than black children who use less controlling strategies. For both black and white children, higher monitoring by parents is associated with less reports of acting out behavior in their children. These findings suggest that the environmental context needs to be considered in understanding the fit between children's needs for increasing autonomy and the family environment. More dangerous environments may call for more restrictive measures than less dangerous environments.
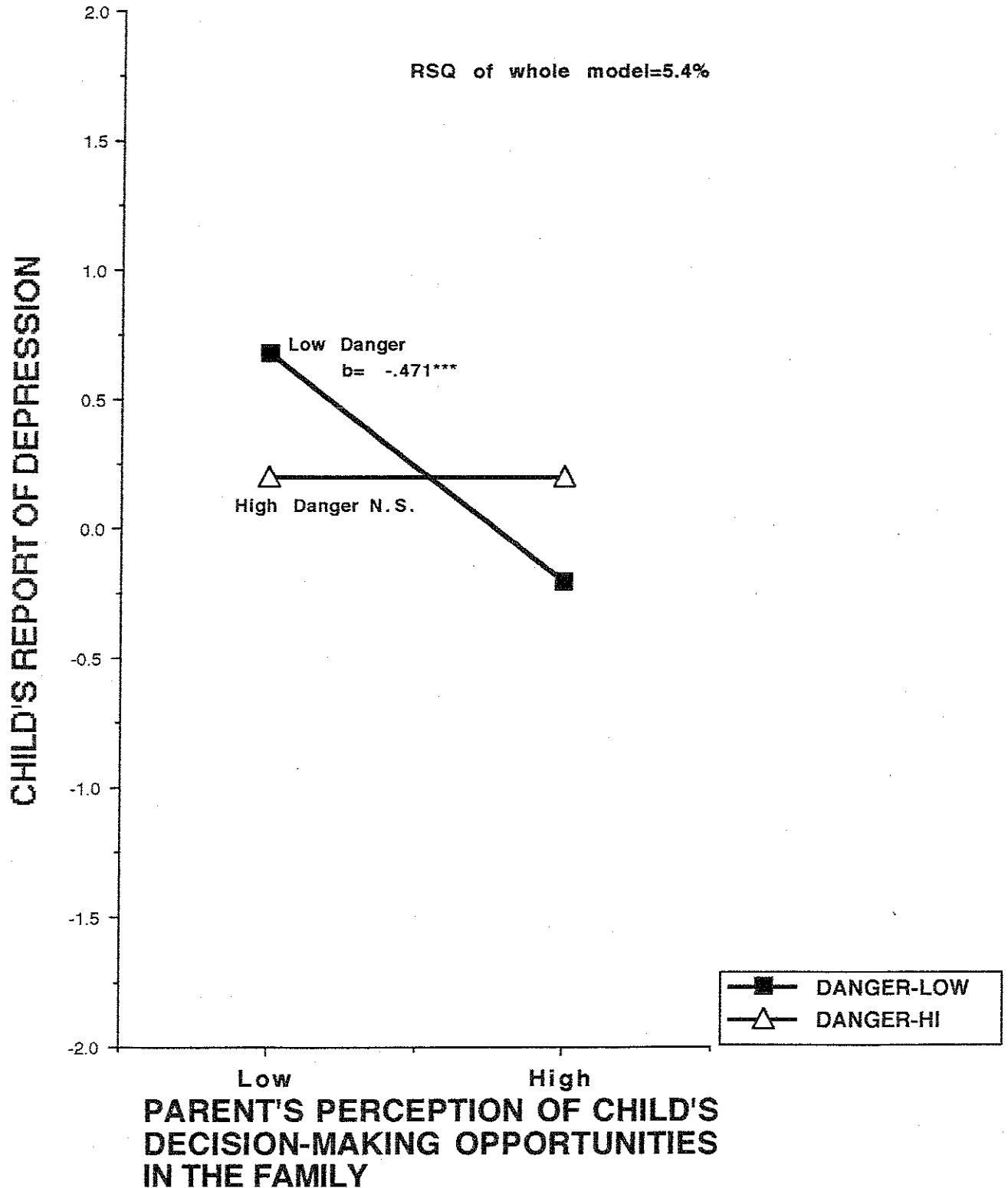
Discussion

These findings can be understood in terms of the relationships between children's context, their needs for increasing autonomy and parents' desires to protect them during early adolescence. Since the majority of the families in the study live in high risk environments, a closer monitoring strategy was related to better outcomes such as less depression and less acting out behavior. Parents' perceptions of dangers in the environment also was related to the effectiveness of family strategies. In many of the studies with white middle-class samples, decision-making opportunities are usually found to be positively related to better child outcomes. This relationship was also found for parents who perceive their environment to be less dangerous. However, for children whose parents perceive their neighborhood to be relatively more dangerous, decision-making opportunities were not related to child outcomes. In addition to perceived danger in the neighborhood, race was also an important variable in the family strategy and child outcome relationship. Higher levels of control were associated with less reported depression in black children but were not related to depression in white children. More opportunity for decision-making was found to be positively associated with depression in white children but not in black children. Since the data aren't longitudinal we are unable to determine the direction of effect. The results of this study indicate the need to include more diverse samples in a longitudinal design in order to understand the relationship between family management strategies and the context in which these families live.

FULL INTERACTION MODEL OF DEMOGRAPHIC AND CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES WITH PERCEPTIONS OF FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AND CHILD OUTCOMES

DEMOGRAPHIC AND CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES

- CHILD'S GENDER
- INCOME
- RACE
- PARENT PERCEPTION OF DANGERS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

PARENT AND CHILD REPORTS OF FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

- DECISION-MAKING
- CONTROL
- MONITORING

INTERACTION BETWEEN CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES AND FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

- RACE X FAMILY VARIABLES
- PARENT PERCEPTION OF DANGER IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD X FAMILY VARIABLES

CHILD OUTCOME

- DEPRESSION
- ACTING OUT BEHAVIOR

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE DANGER BY DECISION-MAKING INTERACTION AND CHILD'S DEPRESSION

RSQ of whole model=5.4%

Low Danger
b= -.471***

High Danger N.S.

CHILD'S REPORT OF DEPRESSION

DANGER-LOW
DANGER-HI

Low   High

PARENT'S PERCEPTION OF CHILD'S DECISION-MAKING OPPORTUNITIES IN THE FAMILY

The regression model controlled for income and child's gender. All variables have been standardized. All reported results are p <.05 (*=.05, **=.01. ***=.001)
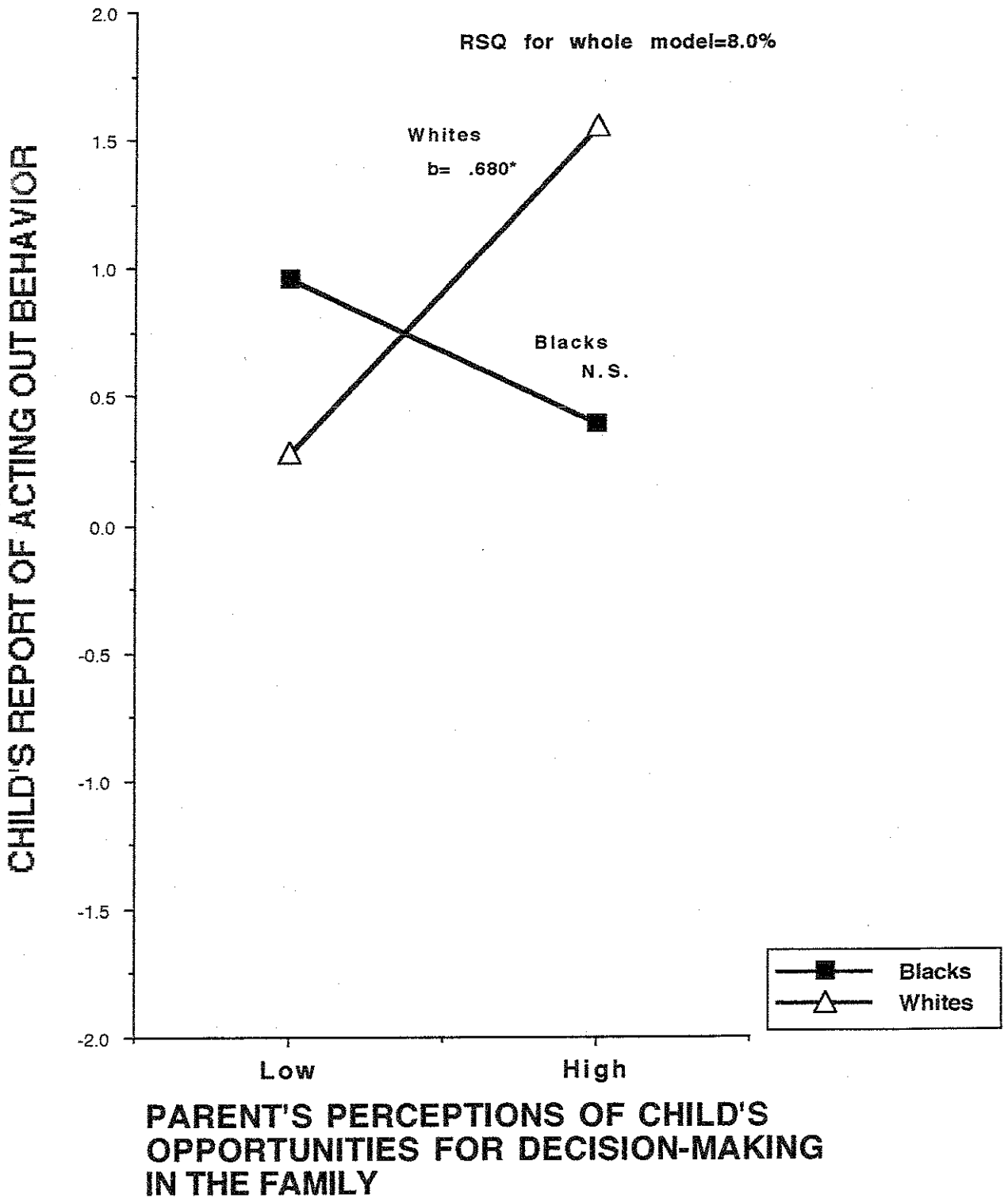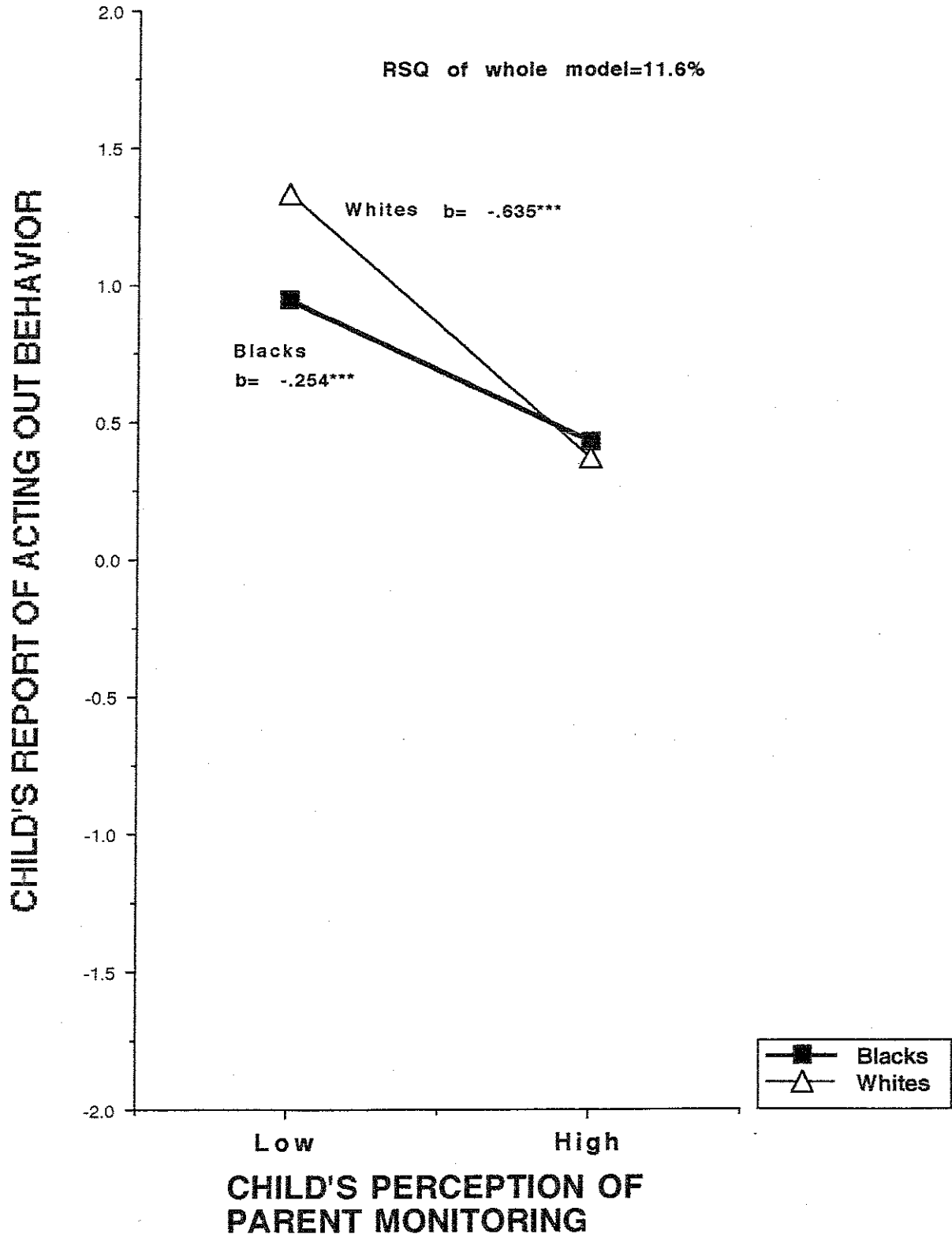
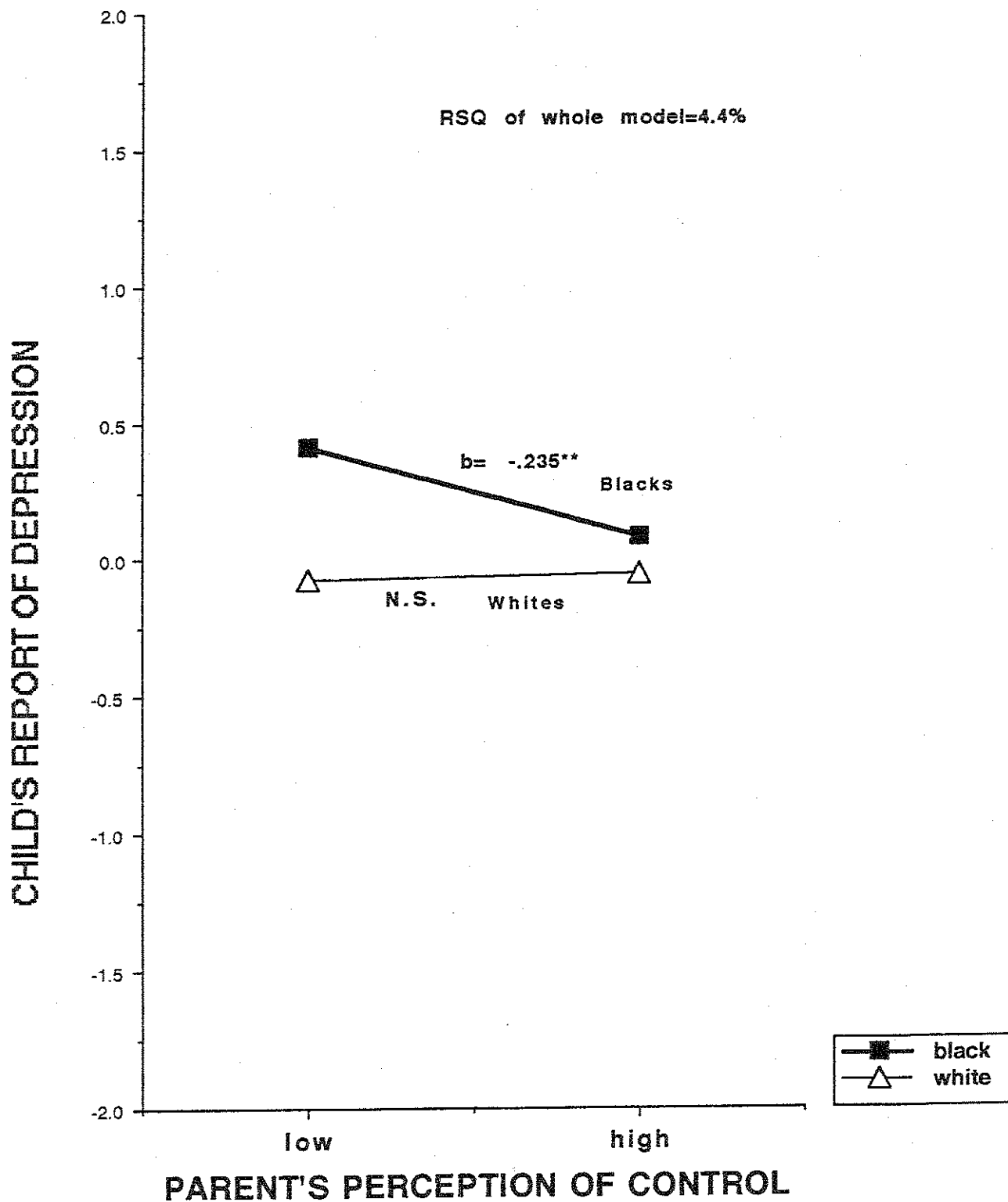# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE RACE BY DECISION-MAKING INTERACTION AND CHILD'S ACTING OUT BEHAVIOR

The regression model controlled
for income and child's gender. All variables
have been standardized. All reported
results are p <.05, (*=.05, **=.01, ***.001)

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE RACE BY MONITORING INTERACTION AND CHILD'S ACTING OUT BEHAVIOR

RSQ of whole model=11.6%

Whites b= -.635***

Blacks
b= -.254***

CHILD'S REPORT OF ACTING OUT BEHAVIOR

Blacks
Whites

Low **High**

CHILD'S PERCEPTION OF PARENT MONITORING

The regression model controlled for income and child's gender. All variables have been standardized. All reported results are p <.05, (*=.05, **=.01, ***=.001)

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE RACE
BY CONTROL INTERACTION AND DEPRESSION

RSQ of whole model=4.4%

b= -.235**

Blacks

N.S.   Whites

black
white

PARENT'S PERCEPTION OF CONTROL

The regression model controlled for
income and child's gender. All variables
have been standardized. All reported
results are p<.05. (*=.05, **=.01, ***=.001)

TABLE 1

PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF
FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

1. SCALE: DECISION-MAKING
(1=Almost Never, 5=Almost Always)
ITEMS:
1. How often do you ask your child what he/she thinks before deciding on family matters that involve him/her?
2. How often do you ask your child what he/she thinks before making decisions that affect him/her?
3. How often does your child listen to your ideas about how to solve the problem?
4. How often do you ask your child have good ideas about how to solve the problem?
5. How often does your child show a real interest in helping to solve the problem?
6. How often does your child consider your ideas for solving the problem?

2. SCALE: CONTROL (1=Almost Never, 3=Often)
ITEMS: When preventing dangers, how often have you tried any of the following things to keep your child from getting involved on the things you worry about....
1. Talk to your child about it?
2. Punish child for doing things that lead to problems?
3. Keep child home as much as possible?
4. Make sure child was with friends you know?
5. Keep child away from these dangers?

3. SCALE: PARENT PERCEPTION OF
PERCEIVED DANGER IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD
Compared with other blocks in your
neighborhood....

1. Is Your Block....(1=Safer than most blocks, 2=About the same as most blocks, 3=Less safe than most blocks)
2. Does your block have... (1=More neighbors who help each other, 2=About the same, 3=Less neighbors who help each other)
3. Does your block have... (1=More involved parents, 2=About the same, 3=Less involved parents

4. Is your block...(1=A better place to live than most blocks, 2=About the same 3=A worse place to live than most blocks)

TABLE 2
CHILD PERCEPTIONS OF
FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

1. SCALE: MONITORING
(1=Hardly ever, 2=Sometimes, 3=Often)

1. How often would your parent know if you broke these rules?
2. If your parents are not at home do you leave a note or call to let them know where you are going?
3. When your parents are not at home do you know how to get in touch with them?
4. How many days did your parents know that you skipped school?

TABLE 3
CHILD OUTCOME MEASURES
CHILD PERCEPTIONS

I. DEPRESSION
(1= Almost never, 5=Almost always)
ITEMS: How much have you....
1. Felt angry?
2. Felt hopeless?
3. Felt lonely?
4. Felt like you don't care anymore?
5. Felt unhappy?
6. Felt like it's not worth the effort?
7. Felt like crying?
8. Felt bad-tempered?
9. Felt like it's no use?

2. CHILD ACTING OUT
(1=No, 2=Yes)
Items: Have you ever...
1. Stolen or tried to steal a motor vehicle?
2. Stolen or tried to steal something worth over $50?
3. Bought or tried to buy/sell stolen goods?
4. Stolen or tried to steal something worth under $5?
5. Hit/threatened to hit a teacher/adult at school?
6. Hit/threatened to hit one of your parents?
7. Hit/threatened to hit other students?
8. Attacked someone to hurt or kill?
9. Been paid for sexual relations?
10. Paid someone for sexual relations?
11. Been involved in gang fights?
12. Sold marijuana or hashish?
13. Sold hard drugs like heroin, cocaine or LSD?
14. Used force to get things from other students?

References

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