

Predicting Parenting Behavior:
The Role of SES, Neighborhood Risk, and Parental Values

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Abstract

There is extensive literature indicating that lower socio-economic status (SES) parents employ different parenting styles from that of their higher SES counterparts. Unfortunately, there is little existing research on why this is so. The present research considers SES and neighborhood risk as predictors of parental values, which in turn are used as predictors of parental behaviors, in a diverse sample of 7th graders and their parents. The findings indicate that SES predicts neighborhood risk, parental values and parental democratic warmth. Furthermore, parental values and democratic warmth are both significant predictors of child's grade point average. Neighborhood risk and parental democratic warmth are significant predictors of parent report of child's problem solving ability. All three constructs (i.e., neighborhood risk, parental values and parental democratic warmth) are significant predictors of parent report of child resiliency.

Predicting Parenting Behavior: The Role of SES, Neighborhood Risk, and Parental Values

McLoyd (1990) concludes that socio-economic status (SES) is a significant predictor of parenting style. In an extensive review of the literature, she found that parents in poverty, as compared to their wealthier counterparts, value obedience more, are less likely to use reasoning and more likely to use physical punishment as discipline, apply rules less consistently, and are less supportive and affectionate with their children. Using the terminology of Baumrind (1966), lower SES parents tend to be more authoritarian and less authoritative than higher SES parents. Baumrind and other researchers using her framework, tend to agree that optimal child outcomes are associated with an authoritative parenting style.

Unfortunately, most of the work connecting parenting style to child outcomes has been based on middle-class families. Thus, it is premature to conclude that the same parenting styles that are optimal in middle-class homes are also optimal for lower SES families. Furthermore, very little research has attempted to understand why lower SES parents employ different parenting techniques than higher SES parents. Baldwin, Baldwin and Cole (1990) attempted to address both of these issues by arguing that different levels of environmental risk lead to different optimal parenting styles. Children in high risk settings need more rules, stricter discipline, and less autonomy than children in safer environments. Because low SES families tend to live in more dangerous neighborhoods, it would follow from the Baldwin et. al argument that lower SES parents employ different parenting strategies because it is in their children's best interest to do so. Using similar logic, Ogbu (1981) argues that poor Black families value different characteristics for their children than do middle-class White families because of their experiences of discrimination and exclusion from the main-stream economy. He argues that poor Black parents purposefully employ different parenting strategies from middle-class families in order to promote different strengths in their children.

The goals of this research, then, are 1) to better understand the relationship between SES and parenting behavior, 2) to better understand the relationship between parenting behaviors and various child characteristics, and 3) to better understand the relationship between SES and various child characteristics. Based on the theories of Baldwin et al. (1990) and of Ogbu (1981), I propose that socio-economic status has a direct impact on the neighborhood in which a family lives, which in turn affects the values parents have for their children, which in turn affects parenting behaviors. Parenting behaviors are in turn predictive of various child outcomes. Furthermore, I propose that the relationship between child characteristics and socio-economic status is mediated by the neighborhood in which the family lives, the parents values for their children and the parenting strategies employed in the family.

Method

The present study uses interview data from a large survey of family management: The Middle School Family Survey Study. In this survey, a seventh grader and at least one parent from each family were interviewed. This parent was the child's "primary care giver" and was almost always the mother (86%), but was occasionally the father, step-parent, or grandparent. The survey included a broad range of questions aimed at understanding family dynamics, relationships, resources and stressors.

The sample includes 1,482 families from all parts of Prince George's County, Maryland; a county that has urban, suburban and rural sections. The sample is approximately 62% African-American and 34% White.

Measures

Socio-Economic Status (SES):

The socio-economic status variable was created by taking the mean of three standardized variables: 1) total family income, as reported by the parent, 2) the educational attainment of the parent or of the parent's spouse/partner, whichever was higher, 3) the status of the parent's occupation or the status of the spouse/partner's occupation, whichever was higher. Occupational status was coded using the "Occupational Status Scores for 589 Occupations" by Nam and Powers (1983).

Cronbach's Alpha = .75.

Parent's Perception of Neighborhood Risks:

Sample items:

Please tell us if you think each of the following is not a problem, somewhat of a problem or a big problem in your neighborhood.

- A) delinquent gangs or drug gangs
 - B) assaults and muggings
 - C) little respect for rules, laws and authority
- 1 = not a problem
2 = somewhat of a problem
3 = a big problem

Scale includes 14 items.

Mean: 1.55

Standard Deviation: .60

Cronbach's Alpha: .96

Parent Values for Child:

In order to measure parents general values for their children, the following two questions were asked:

- A) Parents differ in what skills they think are important for their children to learn. Listed below are a set of skills that most parents think are important. Of all the important goals listed below, please check the **three** goals you think are the **most important** for your 7th grader.
- B) Now, please check the **three** goals you think are the **least important** for your 7th grader.

The skills the parents were asked to rate were:

- a. concern for and willingness to care for other people
- b. curiosity
- c. good communication skills
- d. good problem solving skills
- e. being able to get along well with others
- f. assertiveness
- g. following rules well
- h. persistence
- i. creativity
- j. obedience
- k. independence
- l. leadership

Please tell us how often your 7th grader does the following things when you and he/she have a problem to solve.

A) How often does your 7th grader show a real interest in helping to solve the problem?

B) How often does your 7th grader have good ideas about how to solve the problem?

| | | | | |
|-----------------|------------------|------------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Almost Never | Not Too Often | About Half the Time | Fairly Often | Almost Always |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Scale includes 6 items.

Mean: 3.85

Standard Deviation: .60

Cronbach's Alpha: .80

Child Report of Grade Point Average (GPA):

On your semester report card last year, how many. . .

A's did you get?

B's did you get?

C's did you get?

D's did you get?

F's did you get?

GPA was calculated by multiplying:

4 times the number of A's reported

3 times the number of B's reported

2 times the number of C's reported

1 times the number of D's reported

These numbers were then added together and the sum was divided by the total number of grades reported.

Mean: 3.16

Standard Deviation: .55

Predictions

A) Lower SES families will live in riskier neighborhoods than higher SES families.

B) Based on the work of Ogbu (1981), I predicted that both SES and neighborhood risk would predict parents' values for their children, such that lower SES families and families from riskier neighborhoods would value obedience more and creativity/independence less than higher SES families and families in safer neighborhoods.

C) Based on the work of Baldwin et al. (1990) and Ogbu (1981), I predicted that SES, neighborhood risk and parents' values for their children would all predict parenting behaviors. More specifically, I predicted that parents of lower SES families, of families

from riskier neighborhoods and who value obedience more and creativity/independence less would be lower on democratic warmth.

D) Lastly, I predicted that families high on parental democratic warmth would have children who were successful in school, and had good problem solving and coping skills. Furthermore, I predicted that any relationship found between these child characteristics and the family's SES would be mediated by the neighborhood risk, the parents' values for their children and parental democratic warmth.

Findings

A) As would be expected, lower SES parents do perceive their neighborhoods as being riskier than higher SES parents ($R^2 = .07$).

B) As predicted, SES is a significant predictor of the value parents place on both obedience and creativity and independence. Lower SES parents tend to value obedience more than higher SES parents ($R^2 = .08$), while higher SES parents tend to value creativity and independence more than lower SES parents ($R^2 = .02$).

However, contrary to my predictions, parent's perception of neighborhood risk is not a significant predictor of parents values for their children.

C) As predicted, SES is a significant predictor of parental democratic warmth, such that higher SES parents tend to report more democratic warmth than their lower SES counterparts ($R^2 = .01$).

Contrary to my predictions, parent perception of neighborhood risk and parental values are not significant predictors of parental democratic warmth.

D) The findings for the various child characteristics show an inconsistent pattern.

Parent Report of Child Resiliency:

(SEE MODEL 1)

As predicted, parental democratic warmth, parental values for the child and parent perception of neighborhood risks are all significant predictors of parent report of child resiliency.

Parents who report higher democratic warmth also report higher child resiliency ($R^2 = .21$). Parents who place a high value on child obedience tend to report lower child resiliency than those who place less value on obedience ($R^2 = .01$). Surprisingly, however, parents who place a high value on creativity and independence also report lower child resiliency than those who place less value on creativity and independence ($R^2 = .01$). Parents who report high neighborhood risks also tend to report lower child resiliency than those who report fewer neighborhood risks ($R^2 = .01$).

Furthermore, there is a simple relationship between SES and parent report of child resiliency (zero-order correlation = .15, $p < .001$). As can be seen in the model, there is no relationship between SES and parent report of child resiliency once parental democratic warmth, parental values for the child and parent report of neighborhood risk are included in the model. This indicates that the inclusion of these variables fully mediates the SES/child resiliency relationship.

Parent Report of Child 's Problem Solving Ability:

(SEE MODEL 2)

While parental democratic warmth and parent perception of neighborhood risk are both significant predictors of the parent's report of the child's problem solving ability, neither parent value variable significantly predicts parent's report of the child's problem solving ability.

Parents who report higher democratic warmth also report higher child problem solving ability ($R^2 = .27$). Parents who report more neighborhood risk report lower child problem solving ability ($R^2 = .01$).

As in the case of parent report of child resiliency, there is a simple relationship between parent report of child problem solving ability (zero-order correlation = .09, $p < .001$). There is no such relationship once the other variables are added into the model, indicating full mediation.

Child Report of Grade Point Average: (SEE MODEL 3)

Parental value placed on obedience is a significant predictor of child GPA, while parental value placed on creativity and independence, parent perception of neighborhood risks and parental democratic warmth are not significant predictors.

Parents who place a high value on obedience tend to have children with lower GPAs than parents who place less value on obedience ($R^2 = .01$).

Contrary to my predictions, there is a significant relationship between SES and child's grade point average ($R^2 = .05$) that is not mediated by the other variables in the model. That is, there is no significant decrease in the SES/GPA relationship when parent report of neighborhood risk, parental values and parental democratic warmth are added to the model.

Conclusion

One of the goals of this research was to better understand the relationship between SES and parenting behaviors, or more specifically between SES and parental democratic warmth. As predicted, parents who are higher on SES also tend to be higher on democratic warmth. However, the predicted relationships between perception of neighborhood risk and parental democratic warmth and between parental values and parental democratic warmth did not materialize. Thus, these variables are not instrumental in understanding the SES/parental democratic warmth relationship. Clearly, more research is necessary to understand the common finding that SES is a significant predictor of parenting behavior. Neighborhood risk and values may be more helpful in understanding the relationship between SES and other parenting behaviors, such as structure and consistency. Variables such as parental psychological distress may be useful in understanding the SES/parental democratic warmth relationship.

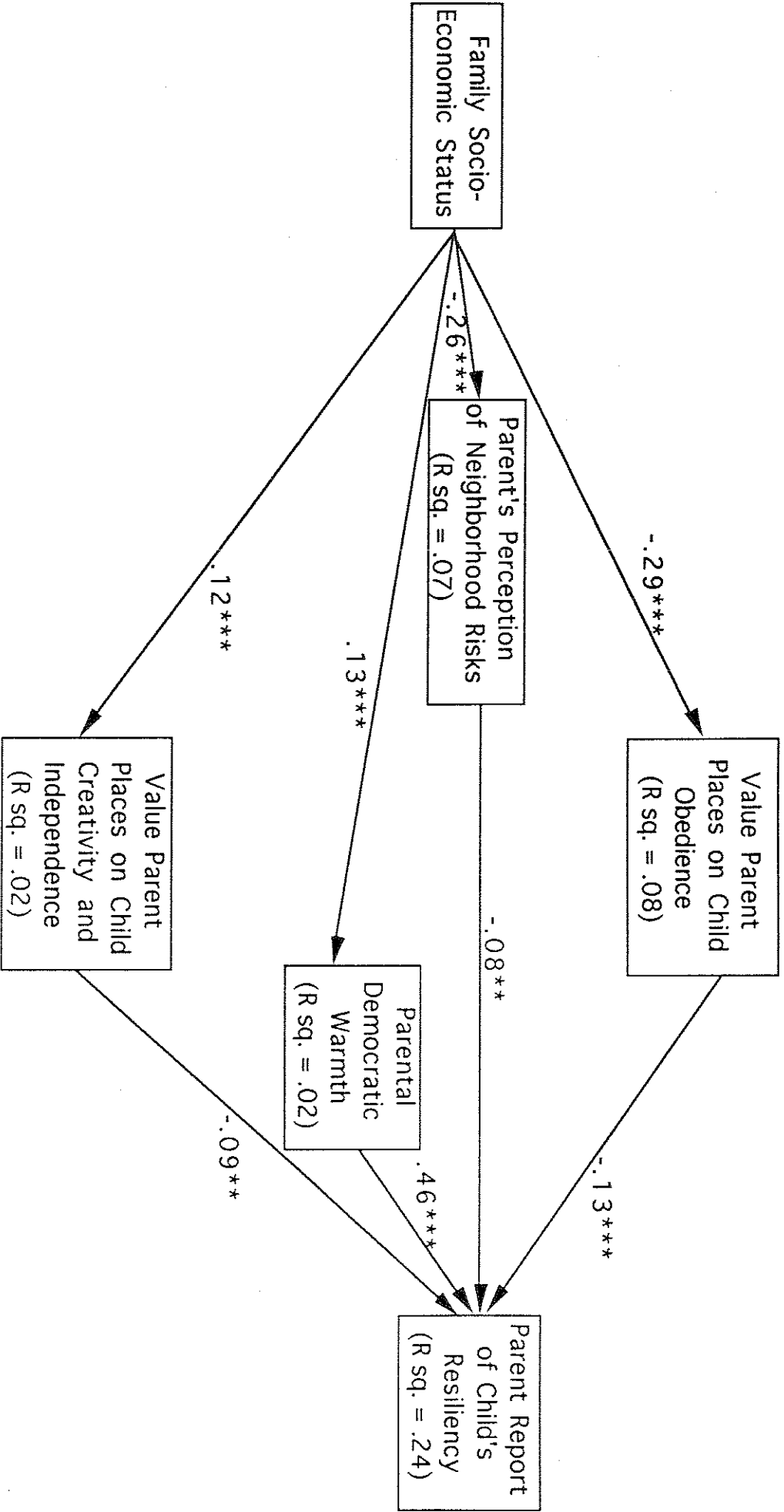
A second goal was to better understand the relationship between parental democratic warmth and various child characteristics. This work was only partially successful. Parental democratic warmth explains a high portion of the variance in parent report of child's resiliency, parent report of child's problem solving ability and child's grade point average. Parental democratic warmth is also significantly related to the child's report of his/her own self-esteem and psychological distress in the directions that would be expected. However, surprisingly, parental democratic warmth is not related to the child's report of his/her own resiliency. (Due to space constraints these three child reported characteristics are not described elsewhere in this poster.) Thus, although parental democratic warmth is important in understanding child characteristics, the inconsistency of these findings may indicate some measurement error. In the future, it would be interesting to consider the relationship between the child's perception of the parents' democratic warmth and the child's perception of his/her own resiliency.

A third goal was to better understand the relationship between SES and various child characteristics. As predicted, parent perception of neighborhood risk, parent values and parental democratic warmth mediate the relationship between SES and parent report of child's resiliency and problem solving ability. However, these variables do not mediate the relationship between SES and child's grade point average. This may be because lower SES children face discrimination in school, are given fewer educational opportunities outside school and are from less educated families than higher SES children. That is to say, the family variables considered in this poster may not be the best ones for understanding the SES/grade point average relationship.

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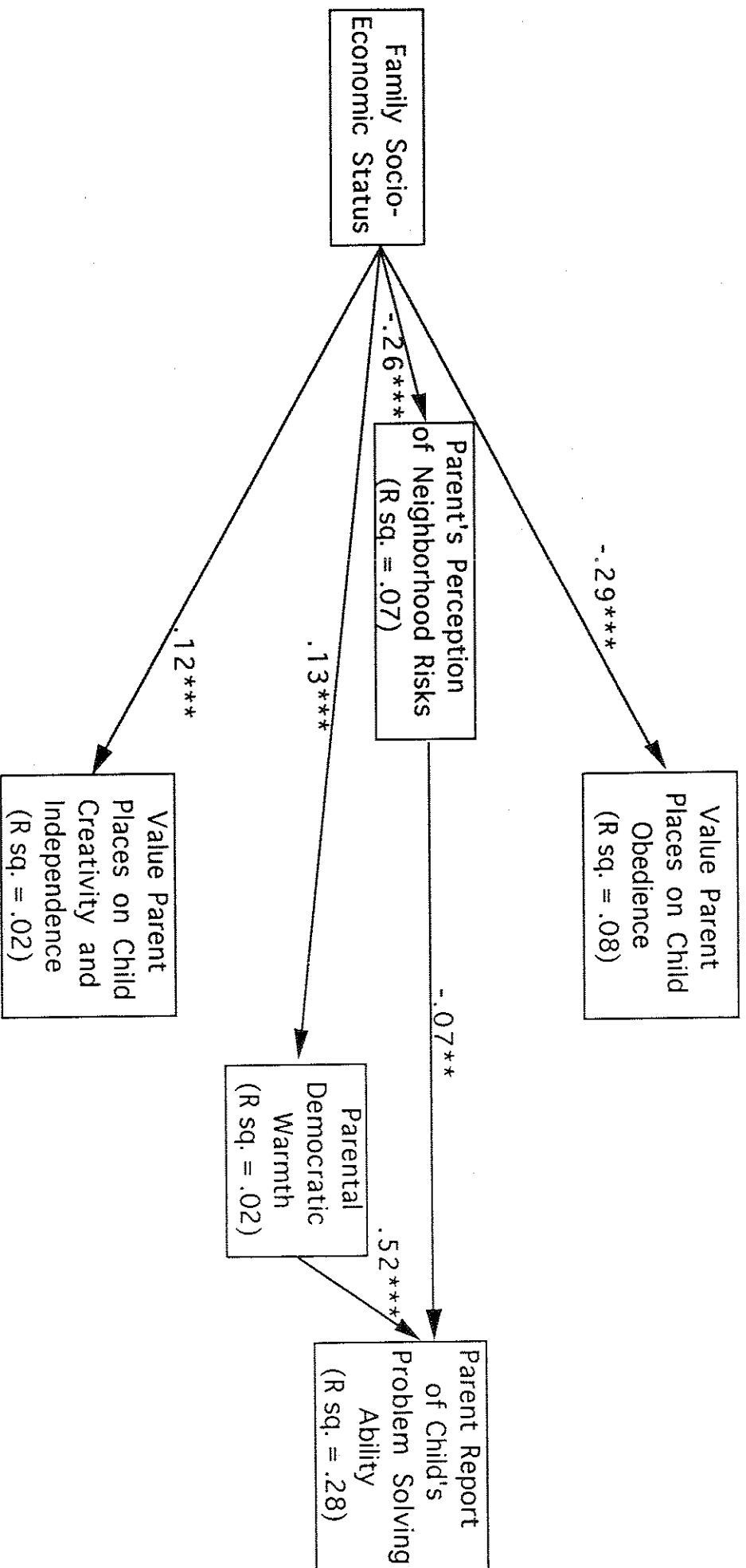
Model 1: Predicting Parent Report of Child's Resiliency



* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

NOTE: Numbers on paths are standardized regression coefficients.

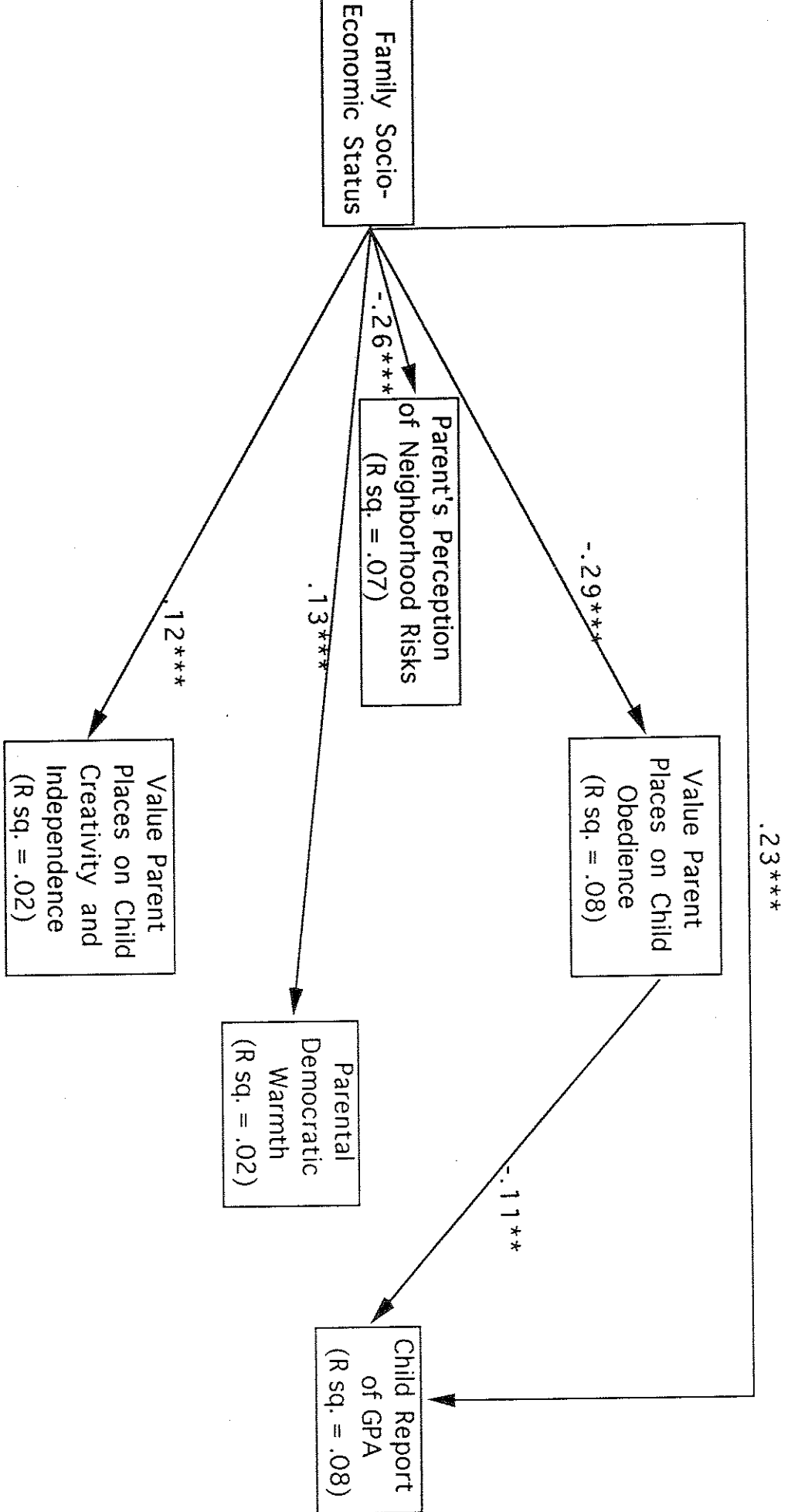
Model 2: Predicting Parent Report of Child's Problem Solving Ability



* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

NOTE: Numbers on paths are standardized regression coefficients.

Model 3: Predicting Child's Grade Point Average



* p<.05, ** p<.01, ***p<.001

NOTE: Numbers on paths are standardized regression coefficients.