

Understanding the Links Between Socio-Economic Status and Parenting Behavior
in African American and European American Samples

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explain the well-established finding that socio-economic status (SES) is predictive of parenting behaviors. Psychological distress and parent's perception of neighborhood resources and risks were proposed as potential mediators. These hypotheses were tested using data from the Maryland Adolescent Growth in Context (MAGIC) study. This sample consists of 1,398 seventh graders and their parents and is heterogeneous with regard to race and SES. All models were tested separately for African American and European American parents because we did not wish to make racial comparisons, but were aware that past research had found race differences in parenting practices. Findings indicate that the parent's psychological distress and parent's perception of neighborhood resources and risks fully mediate the relations between SES and positive relationship with child, for both the African American and European American samples. Psychological distress and perception of neighborhood resources mediate the relations between SES and the degree to which the parent affords decision making opportunities to the child, in the European American sample. However, in the African American sample, SES is not predictive of the degree to which the parent affords decision making opportunities to the child, thus there is no relation to mediate.

INTRODUCTION

Two comprehensive reviews of the literature conclude that lower SES parents, as compared with their wealthier counterparts, are less likely to use reasoning and more likely to use physical punishment as discipline, are less likely to reward children verbally for behaving desirably, and are less supportive and affectionate with their children (Gecas, 1979; McLoyd, 1990). Although extensive work has been conducted linking various parenting behaviors to child outcomes, there has been very little work aimed at understanding the antecedents of the various parenting behaviors.

The current study aims to test two possible explanations for this link between socio-economic status and parenting behaviors.

Psychological Distress

Elder and his colleagues (e.g., Elder & Caspi, 1988) and McLoyd (1990) have argued that economic pressure and hardship adversely affect parenting through psychological distress. Elder and his colleagues have shown repeatedly that economic loss leads to economic pressure in the family, which in turn leads to psychological distress, in the form of depression and hostility, on the part of the parent. This psychological distress leads to hostility, low warmth and arbitrary discipline toward the child, especially on the part of the father. McLoyd (1990) argues that poor parents experience more psychological distress than wealthier parents because they have to deal with frequent negative life events. Further, she points out that patience and concentration are required to do things like explain and negotiate family rules and reward good behavior. She argues that these are just the types of qualities that are difficult to maintain when under psychological distress.

Perception of the Neighborhood

Researchers have also attempted to explain SES differences in parenting by pointing to the environments in which low income families live. For example, Baldwin, Baldwin, and Cole (1990) argue that successful adolescent development is promoted by different parenting behaviors depending on the level of risk and resources in the environment. They argue that while autonomy promoting, low control parenting might be appropriate for adolescents living in low risk, high resource neighborhoods, this

type of parenting may be dangerous and inappropriate for adolescents in higher risk, lower resource settings. Their argument, by extension, is that parents in high risk, low resource settings raise their children differently than those in better neighborhoods because it is in their children's best interest to do so.

Race and Parenting

The current paper is aimed at understanding the relations between SES and parenting behavior, without attempting to make racial comparisons. However, the existing literature indicates that race differences in parenting behaviors do exist (e.g., Dornbusch, et al., 1987), possibly because of race differences in history, ongoing oppression, and current opportunities (Spencer, 1990). Given that SES and parenting may be related differently for African American and European American families and given that we have not set out to make racial comparisons, we have chosen to conduct all analyses separately for the African American and European American samples.

METHOD

The present study uses interview data from the Maryland Adolescent Growth in Context (MAGIC) study. In this survey study, a seventh grader and a parent from 1,398 families were interviewed. This parent was the child's "primary care giver" and was almost always the mother (86%). The survey included a broad range of questions aimed at understanding family dynamics, relationships, resources and stressors.

The sample includes families from all parts of a large Maryland county, a county that includes urban, suburban, and rural sections. The sample is approximately 65% African American and 35% European American.

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

Intermediate Variables (Sample Items)

Psychological Distress:

During the past couple of months (including today) how often have you felt...

A) hopeless?

B) so angry you wanted to smash or break something?

1 = almost never

5 = almost always

Scale is the mean of two subscales, each consisting of 4 items.

Mean: 2.61

Standard Deviation: .62

Cronbach's Alpha: .68

Child Involvement in Decision Making

- A) How often do you ask your 7th grader what he/she thinks before deciding on family matters that involve him/her?
- B) I find that listening to what my 7th grader has to say helps me reach a better decision?
- 1 = almost never 5 = almost always

Scale is the mean of four items.

Mean: 3.96

Standard Deviation: .67

Cronbach's Alpha: .74

PREDICTIONS

A) We predict that when the intermediate variables are not controlled, higher SES parents will report:

- more positive relationships with their children than lower SES parents.
- more child involvement in decision making than lower SES parents.

B) We predict that SES will be related to each of the intermediate variables such that, higher SES parents will report:

- fewer neighborhood risks than lower SES parents.
- more neighborhood resources than lower SES parents.
- less psychological distress than lower SES parents.

C) We predict that when controlling for the three intermediate variables, the relations between SES and the parenting behaviors will disappear or decrease significantly, indicating that these variables mediate the relations between SES and the parenting behaviors.

MODEL 1

A) As predicted, for both the African American and European American samples, when the intermediate variables are not controlled . . .

higher SES parents reported more positive relations with their children than lower SES parents.

MODEL 2

B) As predicted, for both the African American and European American samples, higher SES parents reported: . . .

- fewer neighborhood risks than lower SES parents.
- more neighborhood resources than lower SES parents.
- less psychological distress than lower SES parents.

C) As predicted, when the three intermediate variables are added to the model, the previously significant relation between SES and positive relationship with the child disappears, for both the African American and European American samples.

Conclusions from Models 1 and 2: The intermediate variables mediate the relations between SES and positive relationship with the child for both the African American and European American samples. However, perception of neighborhood risks does not appear to be an important variable in this mediation for the African American parents, as it is not predictive of positive relationship with the child.

MODEL 3

A) In partial support of our predictions, when the intermediate variables were not controlled . . .

higher SES parents reported greater child involvement in decision making than lower SES parents, in the European American sample;

however . . .

there was no relation between SES and child involvement in decision making in the African American sample.

MODEL 4

B) As predicted, for both the African American and European American samples, higher SES parents reported: . . .

- fewer neighborhood risks than lower SES parents.
- more neighborhood resources than lower SES parents.
- less psychological distress than lower SES parents.

C) As predicted, for the European American sample, when the three intermediate variables are added to the model, there is a significant reduction in the size of the relation between SES and child involvement in decision making.

Because there was no relation between SES and child involvement in decision making in the African American sample, tests for mediation were not performed. However, neighborhood resources and psychological distress are both significant predictors of child involvement in decision making in the African American sample.

Conclusions from Models 3 and 4: The intermediate variables partially mediate the relation between SES and child involvement in decision making in the European American sample. However, perception of neighborhood risks does not appear to be an important variable in this mediation, as it is not predictive of child involvement in decision making.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we sought to test the hypothesis that psychological distress and perception of neighborhood risks and resources would mediate the relations between SES and two parenting behaviors: positive relationship with the child and affordance of decision making opportunities to the child. Although other researchers had proposed each of these variables as a possible mediator of these relations, empirical evidence was lacking for each one and the three had never been tested together in the same multivariate models.

Positive Relationship with Child

For both African American and European American parents, psychological distress mediates the relations between SES and positive relationship with the child. We predicted this mediational relation. Low SES has been repeatedly linked to elevated psychological distress because lower SES families are faced with more discrete and chronic stressors in their lives (e.g., Elder & Caspi, 1988; McLoyd, 1990). Psychological distress may be predictive of the relationship with the child because parents experiencing psychological distress lack sufficient emotional resources to engender and maintain a positive parent-child relationship.

Additionally, for both African American and European American parents, perception of neighborhood resources mediates the relation between SES and positive relationship with the child. Lower SES parents report fewer resources than higher SES parents, and parents who report fewer resources, in turn, report more negative relationships with their children. This may be because parents who lack services and social resources are too preoccupied with these issues to enjoy their children.

Interestingly, in the European American sample, perception of neighborhood risk is also *positively* related to a positive relationship with the child. As would be expected, there is a fairly strong negative correlation between neighborhood resources and neighborhood risks ($r = -.24$), thus it is somewhat surprising that both are positively associated with the positive relationship with the child. The relation between perceived neighborhood risks and relationship with the child may in fact reflect two opposing dynamics: (1) a negative effect of the stress of perceived neighborhood risks on parent's mental health, which in turn would undermine the emotional relationship with the child and (2) the need for closer within family emotional support as a defense against the dangers in the neighborhood. In this instance then, since the regression analysis includes parents' psychological distress as a predictor, the first dynamic is, in essence, controlled -- allowing the positive relation implied by the second dynamic to emerge.

Child Involvement in Decision Making.

Psychological distress and perception of neighborhood resources also mediate the relation between SES and child involvement in decision making for European American parents. No relation was found between SES and child involvement in decision making in the African American sample, so there was no relation to be explained.

In the European American sample, as predicted, lower SES parents report more psychological distress, and live in neighborhoods that they perceive as having fewer resources -- both of which, in turn, are related to less provision of opportunities for one's child to be involved in decision making.

Apparently, as we had expected, as parents become more distressed due to economic pressures associated with low SES, they take on a more authoritarian parenting style, affording their child less input into family decisions. This parenting strategy minimizes chaos in the home and limits the need for parent-child negotiations, thereby decreasing the in-home stressors for the parent.

Additionally, as expected, the perception of neighborhood resources partially mediates the relation between SES and child involvement decision making. Neighborhoods rich in resources are likely to present more decisions involving the child to the family. If there are many activities, as well as many available social interactions, the family must make more choices about how to structure the child's time

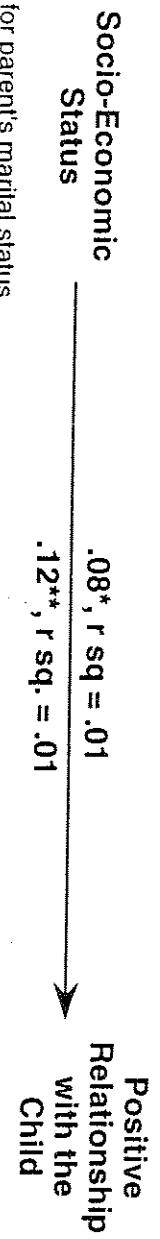
and activities. Because these types of activities directly affect the child's life, it is not surprising that families in such communities are more likely to engage their children in these types of decision making opportunities. Furthermore, the richness of the environment may make the parent feel that some involvement in the family decisions is developmentally appropriate for the child, as the options available are safe and enriching for the child (Eccles, Furstenberg, McCarthy, Lord, 1992; Baldwin et al., 1990). Families living in such resource rich neighborhoods are more likely to have higher, rather than lower, SES.

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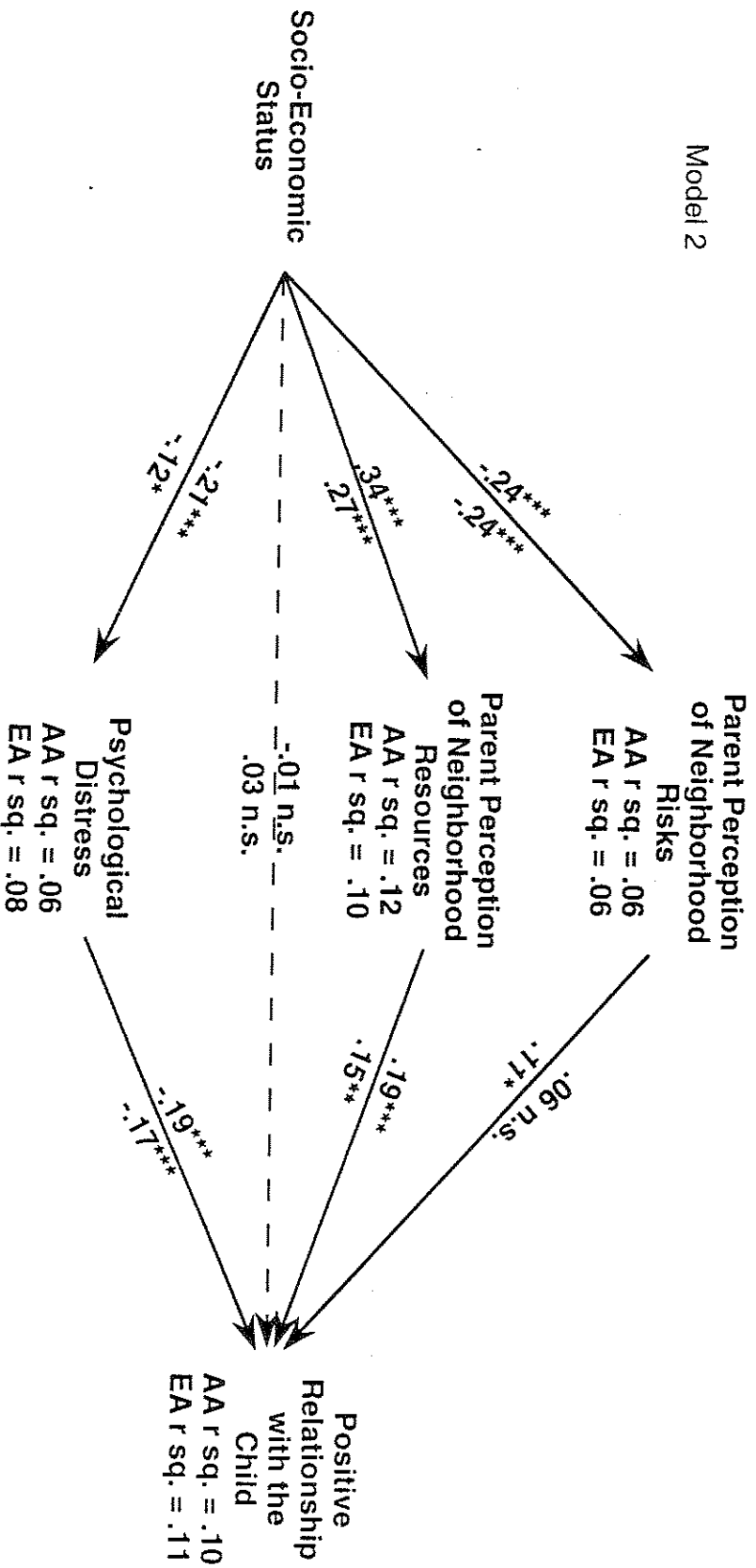
- Standardized regression coefficients for the African American sample are above the lines.
- Standardized regression coefficients for the European American sample are below the lines.

Model 1



• This model controls for parent's marital status.

Model 2

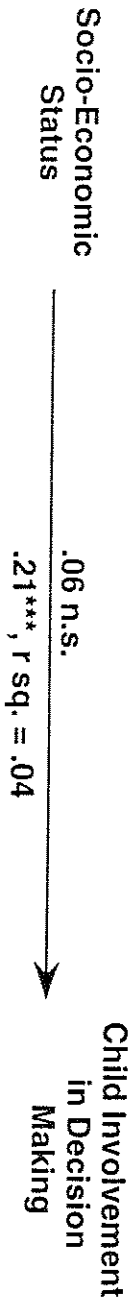


* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

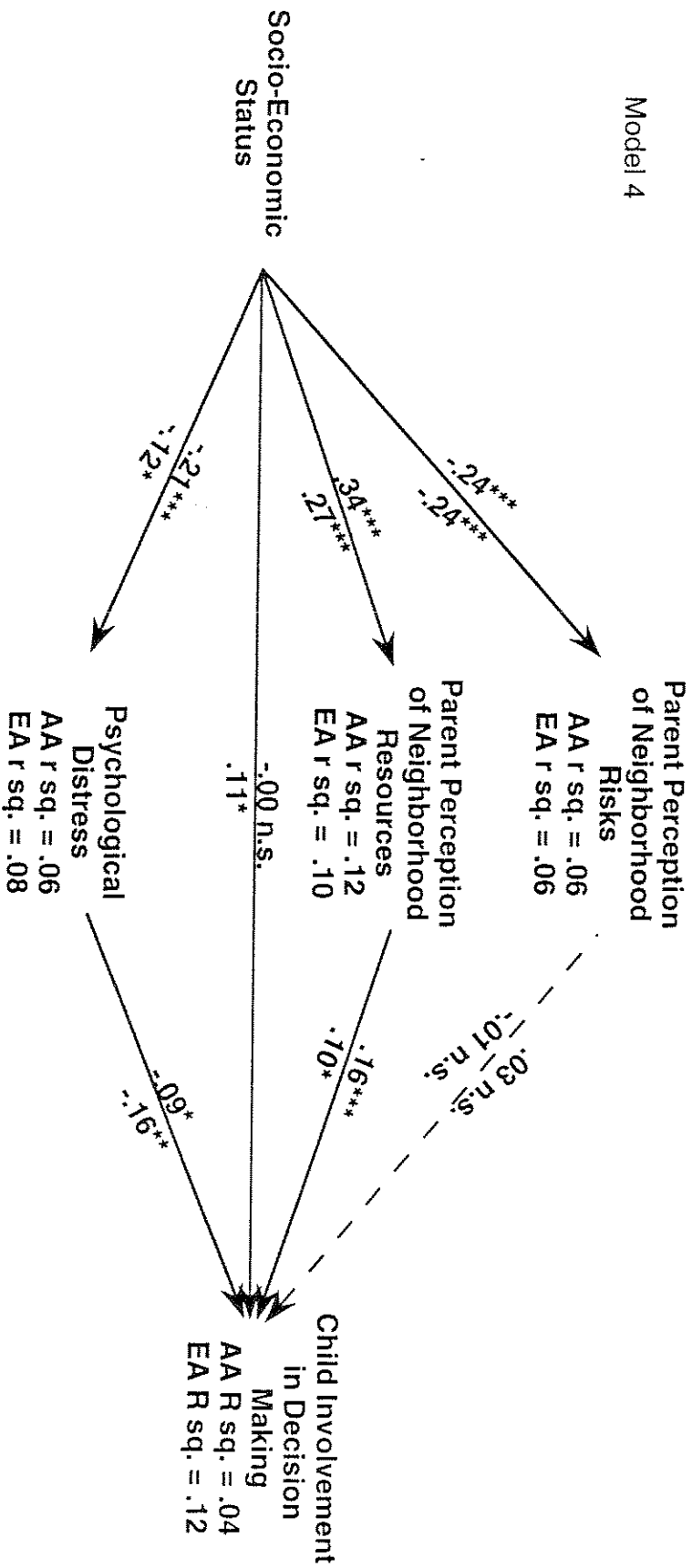
• This model controls for parent's marital status and value parent places on child obedience.

- Standardized regression coefficients for the African American sample are above the lines.
- Standardized regression coefficients for the European American sample are below the lines.

Model 3



Model 4



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

• This model controls for parent's marital status and value parent places on child obedience.