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Disrupting Intergenerational Continuity in Harsh and Abusive Parenting: The Importance of a Nurturing Relationship with a Romantic Partner

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Abstract

Purpose—Harsh, abusive and rejecting behavior by parents toward their children is associated with increased risk for many developmental problems for youth. Earlier research also shows that children raised by harsh parents are more likely to treat their own children harshly. The present study sought to identify behaviors of romantic partners that might help break this intergenerational cycle of child mistreatment.

Methods—Data come from the Family Transitions Project, a 22-year, 3-generation study of a cohort of over 500 early adolescents (G2) grown to adulthood. During adolescence, observers rated G1 harsh parenting to G2. Several years later observers rated G2 harsh parenting toward their oldest child (G3). In addition, G2's romantic partner (spouse or cohabiting) was rated by observers on a range of behaviors expected to affect G2 harsh parenting.

Results—Romantic partner warmth and positive communication with G2 were associated with less G2 harsh parenting toward G3 (a direct effect) and when these partner behaviors were high, there was no evidence of intergenerational continuity from G1 to G2 harsh parenting. When the partner was low on warmth and communication, intergenerational continuity in harsh parenting significantly increased. G1 harsh parenting slightly decreased the likelihood that G2 would select a positive spouse.

Conclusions—Romantic partner warmth, support and positive communication appear to provide interpersonal nurturance that disrupts continuity in parental mistreatment of children. As appropriate, preventive interventions should include a focus on spousal or partner behaviors in their educational or treatment programs.

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Introduction

Because of the potential importance of early experience for the enactment of later parenting roles, an increasing number of studies have examined the degree to which parenting behavior in one generation (G1) predicts parenting in the second generation (G2 [1]. Interest in the study of intergenerational continuity in hostile, harsh, rejecting, abusive or aggressive parenting primarily derives from convincing empirical evidence that harsh behaviors by parents toward their children are associated with a range of developmental problems including aggressive, antisocial or delinquent behaviors [2,3,4]. In fact, there is evidence that parental harshness in one generation leads to similar childrearing behaviors in the next, at least in part because of the aggressiveness or antisocial behavior that G1 harsh parenting intensifies in G2 early in development [5,6].

Also important, more recent studies have overcome many of the methodological limitations of earlier research on intergenerational continuity, such as the use of retrospective reports and reliance on a single informant to measure all study variables [1,7,8]. Retrospective reports, of course, are prone to memory errors and to distortions based on current life circumstances or personal dispositions. Reliance on the self-report of a single individual creates method variance problems that may inflate the magnitude of the estimated relationship between G1 and G2 harsh or abusive parenting, thus suggesting greater intergenerational continuity in child mistreatment than actually exists. These methodological improvements in research design have led to the conclusion that there is a somewhat modest but robust association between G1 and G2 parenting. This finding is robust in the sense that it is well-replicated across several well-designed studies [1].

As noted, earlier research also suggests that harsh and abusive parenting in one generation exacerbates general tendencies toward aggressive or antisocial behaviors in the next generation and these adjustment problems appear to carry over into later G2 parenting. The major limitation in this line of research, however, is the failure to identify individual characteristics or social processes that might disrupt this cycle of child maltreatment. The primary purpose of the present study is to identify dimensions of adult romantic relationships that hold promise for reducing continuity in harsh parenting. In earlier reports we have found that two parents in the same family will tend to influence one another's childrearing behaviors [9,10]. In this process, when one parent has experienced a history of harsh parenting, they are less likely to use similar behaviors with their own children if their spouse models warm and supportive behaviors toward children [9].

In this report we extend this idea in two ways. First, we propose that if one parent has experienced a history of harsh parenting, they will be less likely to repeat these behaviors if they have a spouse or romantic partner who demonstrates nurturing behaviors that indicate care, concern and affection. Our markers of these types of behaviors include partner warmth – support and partner positive communication. That is, we expect that G2s with a history of harsh parenting will be likely to emulate these behaviors by their romantic partner in their interactions with other family members, including their children. This hypothesis will be supported if G2 partner's warmth - support and partner positive communication toward G2 are negatively related (a statistical main effect) to G2's harsh behaviors toward the G3 child.

Second, we expect that warmth - support and positive communication by a spouse or partner will be generally stress reducing and will inhibit the demonstration of negative affect, one aspect of which involves harsh parenting toward the G3 child. This second hypothesis will be supported if these partner behaviors reduce continuity in G1 to G2 harsh parenting, a statistical interaction effect. The hypothesis is consistent with a long history of research on the protective effects of social support as well as with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's view that nurturing relationships in families will help to reduce risk for child maltreatment [11,12]. Finally, earlier research indicates that social history partially determines the kinds of social relationships that individuals develop in their lives [13]. Thus, we hypothesize that a history of harsh parenting will be negatively related to having a warm and supportive romantic partner. We expect, however, that the magnitude of this association will be relatively modest for this third, selection hypothesis. Because socioeconomic status (SES) is correlated with many aspects of family relationships [13], we included SES as a control variable in the analyses.

Methods

Participants

Data for the present study were drawn from the Family Transitions Project (FTP), an ongoing, longitudinal study of 558 target youth (51% female) and their families. Interviews were first conducted with members of this cohort of adolescents (G2) and their parents (G1) in 1994, when they were in twelfth grade. G2 participants were interviewed in alternating years, with an average retention rate of almost 90% through 2005, when they averaged 29 years of age. Of the original 558 families, 107 adolescents came from single-mother families and the remainder of these youth lived with both their biological parents. Participants lived in rural counties in north central Iowa, and thus were all European Americans from primarily lower-middle and middle-class families. Additional information about the initial recruitment and the families involved is available in Conger and Conger [14].

Beginning in 1997, the oldest biological child (G3) of the G2 target was recruited for study. To be eligible for participation the child had to be at least 18 months of age and the G2 target parent must have been in regular contact with the G3 child. The current study focuses on the 290 G2 targets (120 males, 170 females) who had a G3 child eligible for participation by 2005. Our study used data from the G2 targets' adolescent years, prior to their becoming parents, as well as data from the annual assessments of each G3 child. A total of 90% of the G2 target parents with eligible children agreed to participate. The G2 targets averaged 25.6 years of age at the first assessment during which G3 entered the study, which is the focus of the present analyses. Almost 81% of the G2 targets were living with the other biological parent of the G3 child at the first G3 assessment. The average age of the G3 children at first assessment was 2.31 years. There were 157 G3 boys and 133 G3 girls.

Procedures

G2 targets and their G1 parent(s) were recruited from public and private schools in rural areas of Iowa during G2's adolescent years. Letters explaining the project were sent to eligible families, who were then contacted by telephone and asked to participate. Seventy-

eight percent of the two-parent families, and over 90% of the single-parent families agreed to be interviewed. During each assessment period, professional interviewers made home visits to each family for approximately 2 hours on two occasions. During the visits, each family member completed a set of questionnaires covering an array of topics related to work, finances, school, family life, mental and physical health status, and social relationships. In addition, G1 and G2 participated in a structured interaction task which was coded by trained observers. The task consisted of the family members (mother, father, and the target adolescent) discussing and trying to resolve issues and disagreements they had cited as most problematic in a questionnaire they had completed earlier in the visit. As over 25% of the targets were part of single-mother families, the current analyses use data from the mother-target interactions.

Beginning as early as 1997 the G2 target and G3 child were visited at home once each year by trained interviewers. Data were collected from G2 targets and their G3 children, as well as from the romantic partners (married or cohabiting) of the G2 targets (when they had one), following procedures similar to those described for G2's family of origin. The G2 target and participating partner (when applicable) completed a series of questionnaires on parenting beliefs and behaviors, the characteristics of the G3 child, social relationships, economic circumstances, as well as mental and physical health status.

During the first assessment, the G2 target and G3 child engaged in a videotaped interaction task called the *puzzle task*, which lasted 5 minutes. In the puzzle completion task, G2 and G3 were presented with a puzzle that was too difficult for children to complete alone. G2 parents were instructed that the child should complete the puzzle alone; however, the parent could provide assistance if absolutely necessary. Puzzles varied by age group so that the puzzle slightly exceeded the child's skill level. This interaction task created a stressful environment for both parent and child and the resulting behaviors indicated how well the parent handled the stress and how adaptive the child was to an environmental challenge. We expected that this task would produce a stressful situation likely to exacerbate harsh parenting for G2s if they engaged in such behaviors. In addition, G2 targets participated in a 25 minute video discussion task with their romantic partners during which they discussed the pleasant and unpleasant events in their lives, how they handle conflicts, and plans for the future. Trained observers coded the quality of the behaviors between participants using the Iowa Family Interaction Rating Scales [15]. Each interaction task (G2 with G3, G2's partner with G2) was coded by an independent observer.

Measures

G1 harsh parenting—During the first wave of data collection for the FTP, the final year of high school, trained observers rated the G1 mother on a 9-point scale from low to high on the degree to which she showed hostility (angry or rejecting behavior), angry coercion (demanding, stubborn, coercive), physical attacks (hitting, pushing, pinching, etc.), and antisocial behavior (self-centered, immature, insensitive) toward the G2 target during adolescence. Internal consistency reliability was acceptable across the four scales ($\alpha = .91$), and the average intraclass correlation between observers across the four scales was .70. The

four rating scales were used as multiple indicators for a latent construct (factor loadings ranged from .44 to .97).

G2 harsh parenting—Trained observers rated G2 targets on a 9-point scale from low to high on the degree to which they showed hostility (angry or rejecting behavior), angry coercion (demanding, stubborn, coercive), physical attacks (hitting, pushing, pinching, etc.), and antisocial behavior (self-centered, immature, insensitive) toward the G3 child. Internal consistency reliability was acceptable across the four scales (α = .96), and the average intraclass correlation between observers across the four scales was .77. The three rating scales were used as multiple indicators for a latent construct (factor loadings ranged from . 77 to .98).

Warmth - support and positive communication by G2's partner toward G2 target—G2's spouse or cohabiting romantic partner was rated on 9-point scales involving two different dimensions of warmth and support toward G2. The first measure was concerned with demonstrations of warmth and affection toward G2 and involved four scales assessing warmth - support (warmth/support, endearment, escalate warmth, reciprocate warmth). The four rating scales were used as multiple indicators for a latent construct (factor loadings ranged from .83 to .96). The second measure involved positive communication by G2's romantic partner to G2 based on four rating scales (communication, listener responsiveness, assertiveness, prosocial behavior). The four rating scales were used as multiple indicators for a latent construct (factor loadings ranged from .83 to .94). Internal consistency reliability was acceptable for both the warmth – support construct (α = .88) and for the positive communication construct (α = .83). The average intraclass correlation between observers across the scales was .90 for warmth and support and .80 for positive communication.

SES—We include both per-capita income and education as separate measures of SES in the current study. G2 educational attainment was assessed using the G2 target's self-report of years of schooling completed at the time of G3's first assessment. G2 per-capita income was assessed using G2 target's self report of per capita income at G3's first assessment, which we then divided by 1000.

Analyses

Study hypotheses were evaluated using structural equation models (SEMs). We first assessed the measurement model and considered equivalence across G2 gender, assessing model fit using the standard chi-square index of statistical fit that is routinely provided under maximum likelihood estimation of parameters. We also used two indexes of practical model fit, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) [16] and the Tucker – Lewis index (TLI) [17]. The RMSEA is an absolute index of fit. RMSEA values under .06 indicate close fit to the data [18]. For the TLI, fit index values should be greater than .90, and preferably greater than .95, to consider the fit of a model to data to be acceptable [18]. We then tested the degree to which the hypothesized moderators predicted changes in the magnitude of association between G1 and G2 harshness using numerical integration. As estimates of the overall chi-square are not available using numerical integration, we instead

compared the fit of nested models with and without the interaction term using the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) [19] and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) [20].

Results

Correlations

We first ran analyses establishing measurement invariance across G2 males and females, in order to test whether the latent factors could be considered equivalent across the two groups. We used Mplus Version 6 [21] to estimate the model using full information maximum likelihood estimation, first focusing on the measurement model, then turning to the structural paths to test study hypotheses. We first fit a four-factor model using G1 harshness, G2 harshness, G2 partner warmth – support and G2 positive communication. A series of analyses demonstrated strong factorial invariance across gender for all variables [22]. In addition, in the model tests described below we evaluated gender differences in findings for G2. There were no significant differences by gender; therefore we report the results for the combined G2 sample. When we combined G2 males and G2 females into a single group and re-ran the model it showed acceptable fit: $\chi^2 = 84.06$, $df = 55$, $p = .007$, TLI = .981, RMSEA = .043.

Correlations among the latent factors are presented in Table 1. For example, the association between G1 harsh parenting and later G2 harsh parenting was .30. G2 romantic partner's warmth-support and positive communication were both negatively related to G1 harsh parenting, as well as to G2 harsh parenting.

Model Testing

Figure 1 provides the findings related to G2 partner warmth – support to G2. All analyses controlled for G2 income and education. With regard to the first hypothesis, warmth demonstrated by a spouse or cohabiting partner directly reduced the likelihood that G2 would engage in harsh parenting (standardized regression coefficient = −.27, standard error = .06). Nevertheless, there was still significant evidence of G1 to G2 continuity in harsh parenting (β = .22, SE = .07). The findings were also consistent with hypothesis 2 inasmuch as warmth – support moderated the association between G1 and G2 harsh parenting (β = −.26, SE = .06). Finally, there was modest evidence of social selection as demonstrated by the significant association between G1 harsh parenting and partner warmth – support (β = −.23, SE = .09), which suggests that G2s raised by a harsh parent were less likely to have a warm and supportive spouse.

Figure 2 provides simple slopes depicting the interaction effect between partner warmth - support and G1 harsh parenting. The upper part of the figure shows that, when partners were 1 standard deviation above the mean or more on warmth – support, the association between G1 and G2 harsh parenting was not statistically significant (β = −.04). However, when partners were low in warmth – support, the association between G1 and G2 harsh parenting was intensified (β = .48, SE = .02). These results provide further evidence consistent with the study hypothesis.

Figure 3 provides the results for spouse or cohabiting partner positive communication. The findings parallel those for warmth – support as illustrated in Figure 1. Consistent with hypothesis 1, positive communication was negatively related to G2 harsh parenting. Consistent with hypothesis 2, positive communication moderated the association between G1 and G2 communication and there was also evidence of a social selection effect (hypothesis 3). The results also indicate that there continued to be a direct association between G1 and G2 parenting. Finally, Figure 4 illustrates the interaction effect as was done in Figure 2 for warmth – support. Again, the results show that, when G2's romantic partner demonstrates care and concern through positive communication, there was no significant relationship between G1 and G2 harsh parenting. When the partner was below the mean on positive communication, however, intergenerational continuity in harsh parenting was intensified.

Discussion

Well-designed studies conducted prospectively over time and across generations have demonstrated intergenerational continuity in harsh, hostile, and abusive parenting (Conger et al., 2009). The importance of these findings is underscored by the fact that these types of parenting behaviors exacerbate adjustment problems for children and adolescents (Dogan, Conger, Kim, Masyn, 2007). Included among these problems are antisocial tendencies that may play out in later aggressive or abusive behaviors toward the next generation of children. Despite the established importance of intergenerational continuity in mistreatment for successive generations of children, almost nothing is known about specific mechanisms that might disrupt this toxic cycle of parenting practices.

To address this important deficit in earlier research, in the current report we hypothesized that the care, concern and affection of a spouse or cohabiting romantic partner might provide a mechanism for reducing continuity in harsh parenting. We used two different measures as indicators of these types of behaviors, observed partner warmth – support and partner positive communication. We hypothesized that these forms of nurturance should protect against continuity in child mistreatment in two different ways. First, we proposed that when partners demonstrate care and concern, these actions will provide a model that a second generation parent will likely emulate at least to some degree. When this happens, even parents who experienced early mistreatment in their family of origin should be more likely to treat other family members, including their children, in a nurturing fashion. Second, we expected that positive behaviors by a romantic partner would act as a source of social support in general, support that typically reduces the link between other social experiences and the demonstration of negative affect (Conger et al., 1999). Finally, we expected that G2 parents who had experienced harsh parenting as youth would be less likely to select nurturing partners; however, when they did, we predicted that the noted beneficial effects would occur.

Based on actual observations of parenting and partner behaviors in two generations of families, we found significant support for our study hypotheses. First, warmth – support and positive communication by a partner reduced the likelihood that the co-parent would engage in harsh parenting even when (s)he had a history of being treated harshly as a child or

adolescent. Moreover, nurturing behaviors by a romantic partner completely disrupted intergenerational continuity in harsh parenting. To our knowledge this is the first study to demonstrate at least one social mechanism that can break the intergenerational cycle of child maltreatment. Also encouraging, although harsh parenting in the first generation predicted the selection of a less nurturing spouse or partner, this association was far from perfect indicating that many G2 parents will enter into supportive relationships in spite of a problematic parenting history.

In addition to their theoretical and empirical significance, these results suggest that prevention or intervention programs interested in breaking the cycle of maltreatment need to look at co-parent as well as parent child relationships. Most parenting programs, for example, have a singular focus on one parent's behavior, typically the mother's. These findings suggest that, when a romantic partner is present, promoting the partner's positive contributions to the parenting environment may have great benefits. The results also suggest that the CDC's emphasis on nurturing parent-child relationships as one element in reducing child maltreatment only tells part of the story. Fostering of care and concern among multiple family members may play a significant role in reducing intergenerational continuity in harsh parenting. Of course, these results have limitations, including reliance on a majority sample of rural adolescents grown to adulthood. They will need to be replicated in more diverse populations to increase confidence in their generalizability. Nevertheless, they provide very promising evidence regarding an important mechanism for reducing the risk of an intergenerational legacy of harsh, abusive or aggressive parenting.

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Implications and Contributions

This report shows that nurturing behaviors by a romantic partner reduce the likelihood that a parent raised in a harsh manner will use this same parenting style with children. Thus, the findings identify an important social mechanism that holds promise for helping to break the intergenerational cycle of child maltreatment.

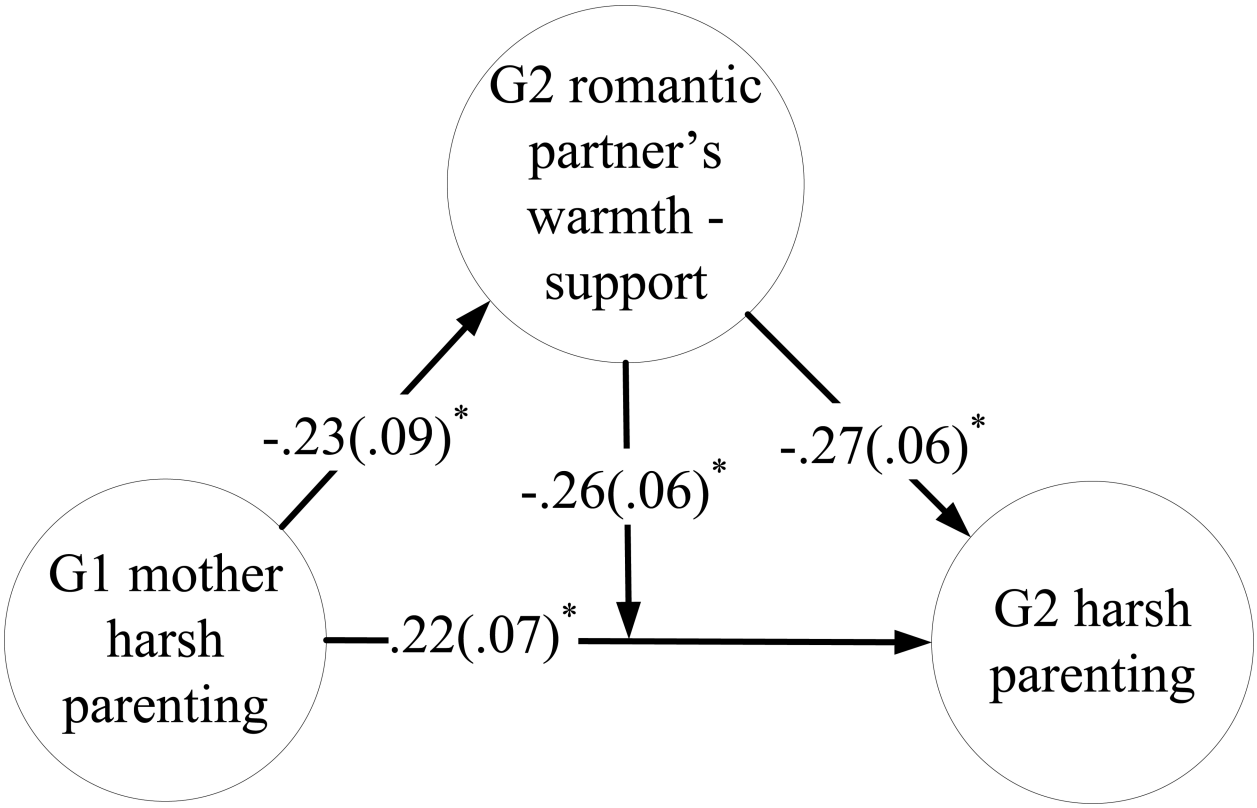

Figure 1.
Standardized Coefficients and Standard Errors from Model for G2 romantic partner's warmth – support; AIC = 10324.6, BIC = 10446.8.

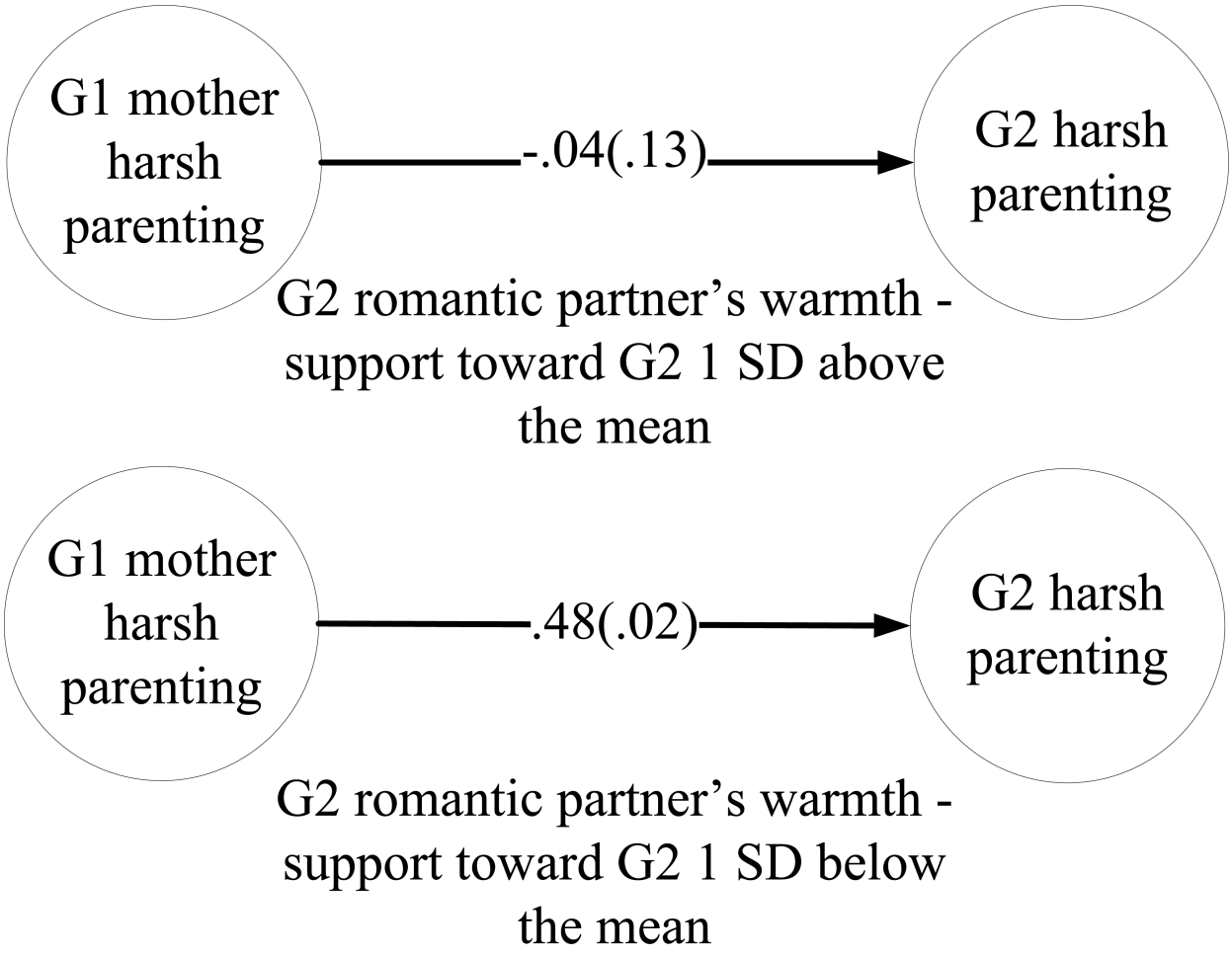

Figure 2.
Simple slopes of the intergenerational continuity in harsh parenting at low and high levels of warmth – support by G2's romantic partner.

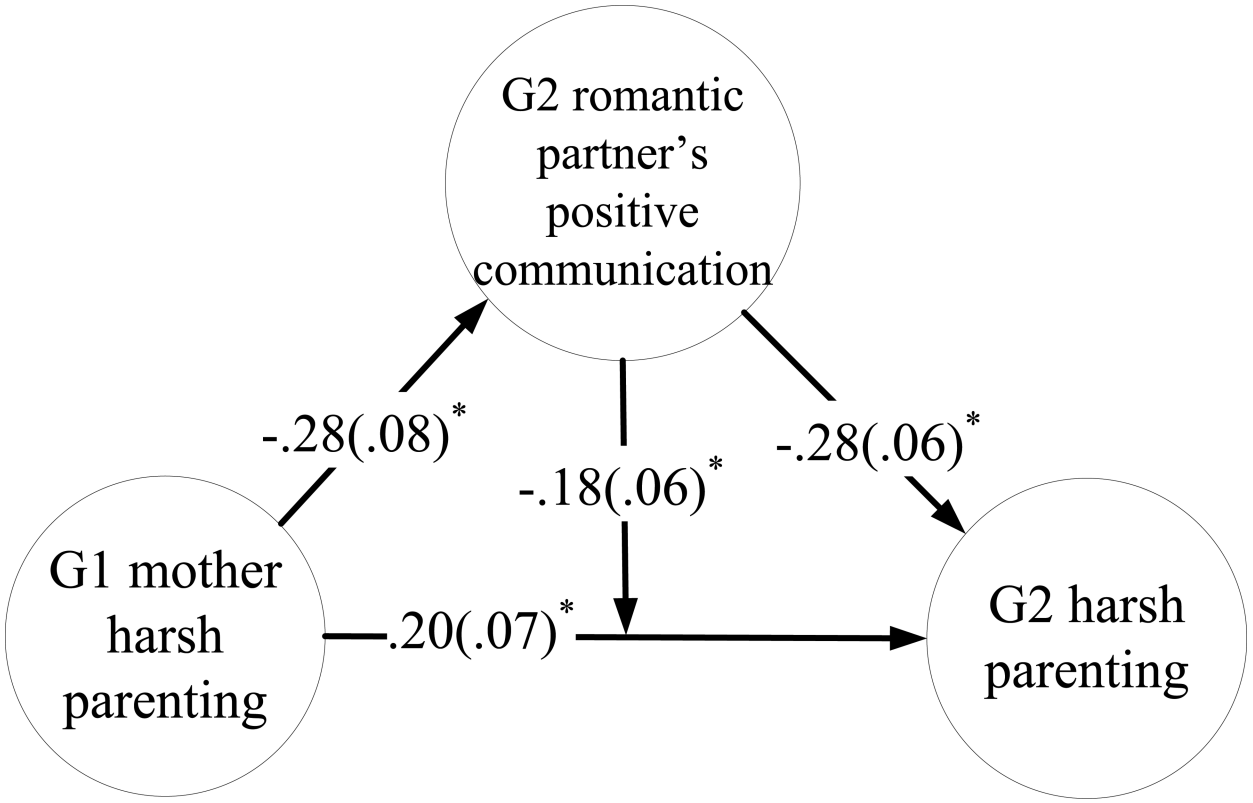

Figure 3.
Standardized Coefficients and Standard Errors from Model for G2 romantic partner's positive communication; AIC = 10266.6, BIC = 10386.7.

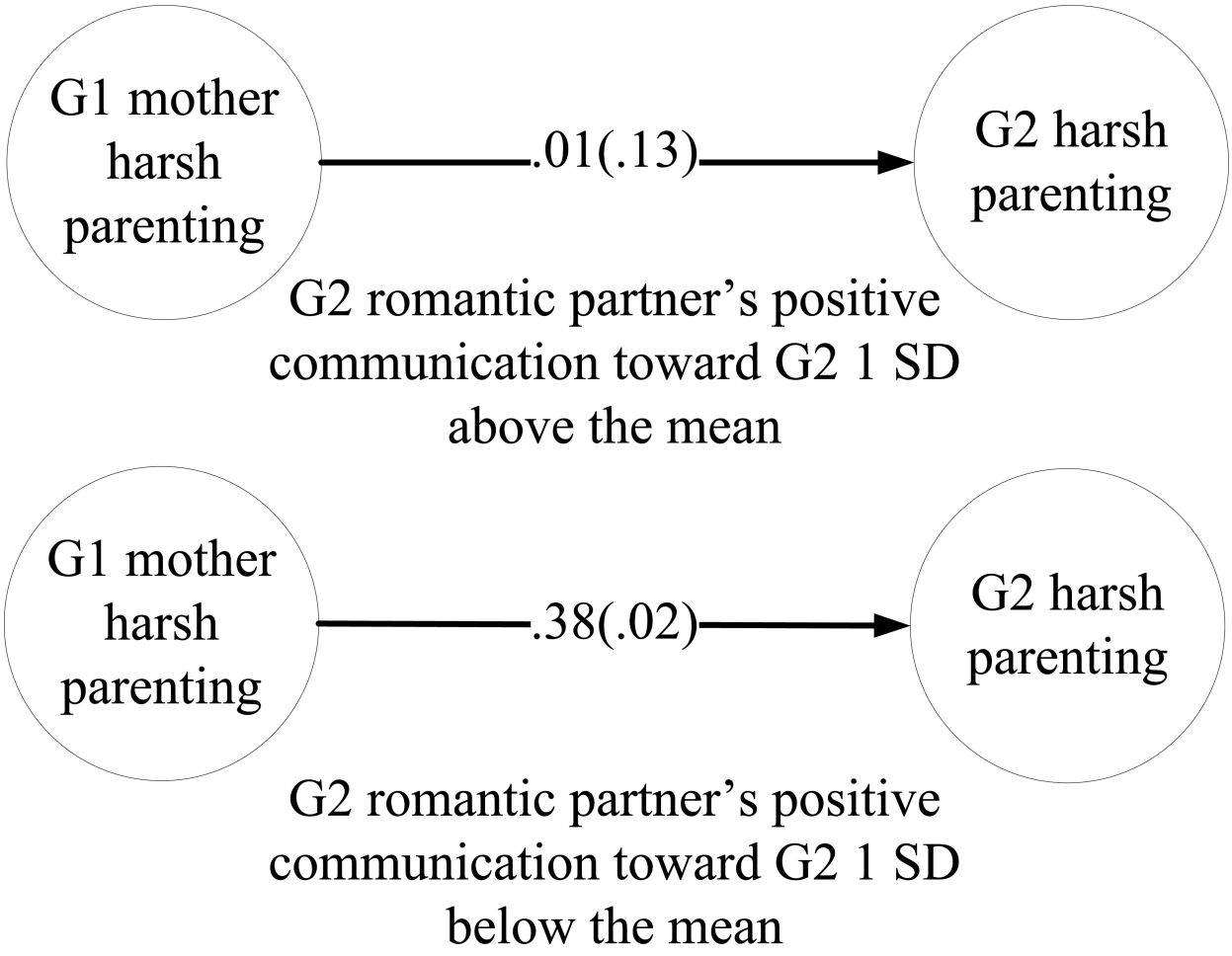

Figure 4.
Simple slopes of the intergenerational continuity in harsh parenting at low and high levels of positive communication by G2's romantic partner.

Table 1

Correlations Among Variables Used in Analyses

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. G1 harsh parenting	-			
2. G2 harsh parenting	.30	-		
3. Warmth and support from romantic partner	−.12	−.26	-	
4. Positive communication from romantic partner	−.20	−.30	.62	-