INTRODUCTION

Research has highlighted that youth who grow up in a family where parents are married fair better, specifically when the paternal caregiver is more involved (Bachman, Coley, & Carman, 2012; Bachman, Coley, & Chase-Lansdale, 2009). This finding may be particularly important in homes where parenting stress or psychological distress is relatively higher for one of the caregivers (i.e., second caregiver is a protective factor). However, the ways in which family structure impacts specific emotional processes is understudied. Thus, examining possible differences in emotional processes of adolescents in single versus two-parent homes is warranted.

Emotional magnification is, in more simplistic terms, caregivers modeling poor emotion regulation (e.g., gets upset, too) when his/her child is sad (O’Neal & Maga, 2005). Thus, recognizing and targeting emotional regulation in a family context in youth presenting with externalizing problems may be particularly important when the maternal caregiver appears to engage in magnification of adolescent emotions and/or the adolescent struggles to regulate emotions.

The current study examined whether family structure (single-parent versus two-parent homes) moderated a model in which maternal emotion magnification (EM) and adolescent emotion regulation (ER) act as serial mediators in the relation between maternal distress and adolescent externalizing behaviors.

Specifically, it was hypothesized that paternal presence would attenuate the path between EM and ER.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 206 maternal caregiver-adolescent dyads. Children were ages 11 to 17 years (M = 14.18; SD = 1.90), roughly half were male (51.5%), and the majority were identified as Caucasian (76.7%). Maternal caregivers were ages 29 to 60 years (M = 41.08; SD = 7.47), roughly half were married (58.3%), and the majority were identified as Caucasian (82.0%).

Measures

Caregivers completed a battery of measures including: Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS), Parenting Stress Scale (PSS), Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), and Parent-rating of Reactive and Proactive Aggression (PRPA). Children were administered: Emotions as a Child Scales (ECS) and Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS). Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), and Parenting Practices Proactive Scale (PRPA).

Procedure

This project was approved by and conducted in compliance with the Institutional Review Board as part of a larger study. Participants were recruited through an online data management company (i.e., Qualtrics) and paid for their participation. Children were administered: Emotions as a Child Scales (ECS) and Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS), Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), and Parenting Practices Proactive Scale (PRPA).

RESULTS

Multi-group (i.e., single-parent versus two-parent families; single-parent group N = 133, two-parent group N = 73) comparison analyses of the serial mediational model were conducted in the program R.

Maternal and adolescent ages were included as covariates in the magnify model given their association with the endogenous variables.

Steps:

Model 1: Baseline model. All regression coefficients are unconstrained.

Model 2: All regression coefficients are constrained.

Model 3: The direct effect of maternal distress on externalizing behaviors is constrained.

Model 4: The serial mediation indirect effect (i.e., maternal distress — maternal ER — emotion regulation — externalizing behaviors) is constrained.

Model 5: The mediation indirect effect of maternal distress — magnify — ER — externalizing behaviors is constrained.

Model 6: The mediation indirect effect of maternal distress — magnify — ER — externalizing behaviors is constrained.

Model 7: The direct effect of magnify on emotion regulation is constrained.

Model 8: The direct effect of maternal distress on emotion regulation is constrained.

Model 9: The direct effect of magnify on externalizing behaviors is constrained.

Maternal and adolescent ages were included as covariates in the magnify model given their association with the endogenous variables.

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Model 1: Baseline model. All regression coefficients are unconstrained.

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Model 9: The direct effect of magnify on externalizing behaviors is constrained.

Model 10: The direct effect of magnify on externalizing behaviors is constrained.

DISCUSSION

Results underscore the importance of understanding the complex emotional transactions within a family and need for further research. This finding indicates that a second caregiver appears to act as a protective factor in the context of a distressed maternal caregiver who engages in more negative emotion socialization practices, specifically magnifying emotions.

Such information can be helpful in determining adolescents who are more at-risk for externalizing behaviors.

Does Family Structure Matter? Family Structure as a Moderating Factor in a Serial Mediation Model of Familial Emotional Processes and Adolescent Outcomes

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