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Socio-Cognitive Mechanisms in the Transmission of Harsh and Abusive Parenting Across Three Generations

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Physical abuse appears to affect children's processing of social information. Children who are physically abused are more likely to interpret the actions of others as hostile. Such a hostile intention attribution bias may then increase the likelihood that the child will be aggressive towards others. Thus, hostile attribution appears to be a mechanism in the transition from victim to aggressor. This study examined the role of hostile attribution in the transmission of harsh and/or abusive parenting from one generation to the next. To explore this question, data from a study including grandparents (G1), fathers (G2) and their 7-year-old male and female children (G3) were used. G1's hostile attribution style significantly predicted their abusive parenting of G2 as measured by observer ratings at three different time points. In turn, G2's hostile intention attribution bias at the age of 27 was positively predicted by the G1 parents' abusive parenting 12 years earlier. G1's parenting did not significantly predict either G2's tendency to suggest hostile solutions to a social problem or the amount of anger G2 reported at experiencing a problem. When the transmission from G2 to G3 was examined for a subsample of the G2 men who had 7-year-old children, it was found that G2's hostile attribution bias (but not hostility of solutions or anger) significantly predicted his harsh parenting of G3. These results suggest that socio-cognitive biases could be a mechanism in the transmission of harsh and abusive parenting from one generation to the next. Thus, hostile attribution biases may be a risk factor for such parenting and may serve as a way to identify parents who would benefit from preventive intervention.

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