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Examining Links Between Maternal History of Childhood Sexual Abuse, Parental Reflective Functioning, and Parenting Stress

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Introduction

Survivors of **childhood sexual abuse (CSA)** are at particular risk of experiencing high levels of **parenting stress** (Hugill et al., 2017).

Understanding how CSA leads to increased parenting stress appears essential as the latter is associated with a higher risk of maltreating one's own children (e.g. Francis & Wolfe, 2008; Holden et al., 1989; Miragoli et al., 2016, 2018).

Parental reflective functioning (PRF) i.e., the ability to reflect upon one's own and one's child's internal experience (Slade, 2005), may contribute to explain how CSA increases parenting stress:

- Maternal history of CSA has been shown to be negatively associated with the ability to conceive of her child's inner world (Koren-Karie & Getzler-Yosef, 2019).
- Poorer PRF is, in turn, related to increased parenting stress (Nijssens et al., 2018).

Study Aims

This study aimed at examining

- (1) whether severity of maternal CSA is related to parenting stress
- (2) whether this link is mediated by PRF

Method

Participants

38 mothers of children (15 girls; 1 to 7 years old, $M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.95$) followed by child welfare services for child maltreatment

Measures

The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein & Fink, 1998)

- Sexual abuse subscale (5-25)¹

The Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (PRFQ; Luyten et al., 2017)

- Pre-mentalizing (1-7)¹
- Certainty about the mental states of the child (1-7)¹
- Interest and curiosity in the mental states of

the child (1-7)¹
The Parenting Stress Index (PSI; Abidin, 1995)

- Parental distress (12-60)¹
- Difficult child (12-60)¹
- Dysfunctional interaction (12-60)¹

Statistical Analyses

Partial Least Squares Path Modeling (PLS-PM; Vinzi et al., 2010)

- R version 4.3.0 (R Core Team, 2023)
- plspm package (Sanchez, 2013)
- Bootstrap validation
- PRFQ Certainty and Interest and curiosity scores were inverted.

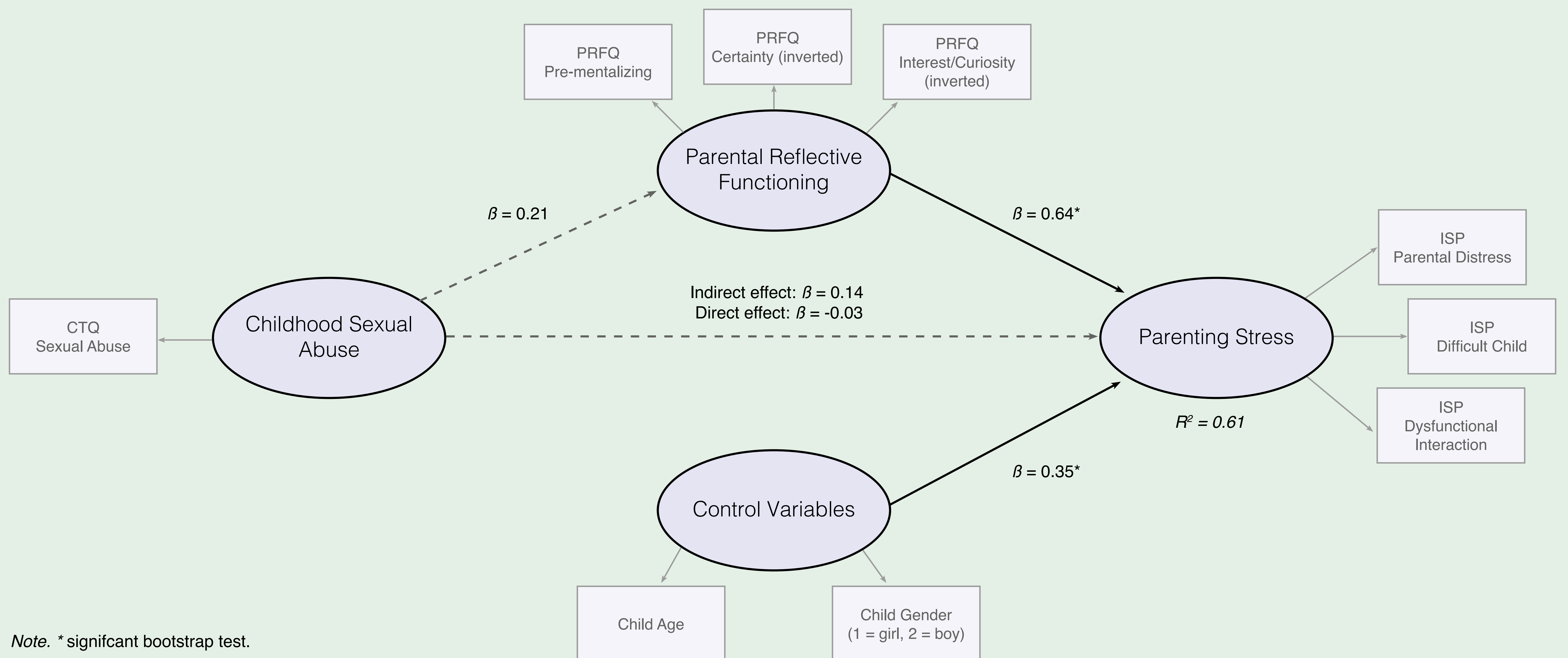
¹Possible range of values

Table 1

Sample Characteristics

Variable	M	SD	n	%	Variable	M	SD	n	%
Mothers' age (years)	32.97	8.10			CTQ				
Mothers' level of education					Sexual abuse (> cutoff score)				
Middle school			9	23.7	Yes			23	60.5
High school			7	18.4	No			15	39.5
Professional school			17	44.7	Sexual abuse (scores)	12.95	7.08		
College/university			2	5.3	Physical abuse	8.79	5.07		
Family structure					Emotional abuse	12.03	6.25		
Nuclear family			14	36.8	Physical neglect	10.32	4.69		
Shared custody			3	7.9	Emotional neglect	14.95	5.62		
Single-parent			20	52.6	PRFQ				
Blended family			1	2.6	Pre-mentalizing	2.31	1.04		
					Certainty	3.84	1.20		
					Interest and curiosity	5.44	1.08		
					PSI				
					Parental distress	33.82	10.39		
					Difficult child	33.92	9.32		
					Dysfunctional interaction	28.11	9.94		

Results



Discussion

Hypotheses concerning the direct and indirect links between CSA and parenting stress were not supported by the findings.

- Factors other than parental history of CSA may better explain parenting stress in the context of child maltreatment (e.g., domestic violence, history of other types of abuse, etc).
- However, due to lack of statistical power in the present study, these findings should be replicated on a larger sample.

Lower quality of PRF was associated with more parenting stress.

- This highlights the importance of interventions aimed at enhancing PRF in high risk contexts in order to reduce parenting stress.

Limitations

- Possible bias due to the use of self-report questionnaires to assess CSA and PRF
- Small sample size