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Parent Informants for Child Personality: Agreement, Discrepancies, and Clinical Utility

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A long-standing issue in child clinical research is the integration of various informants, but this topic has not been comprehensively applied to the domain of child personality. Mothers and fathers rated their children (N = 346) on personality traits and behavioral problems. Mother–father agreement was highest for Conscientiousness and lowest for Neuroticism and Agreeableness. Each parent’s ratings added incremental variance in predicting behavioral problems, and mother–father discrepancy predicted internalizing problems. These results suggest that both parents should be used as informants in child personality assessment and discrepancies might reflect meaningful variance with clinical utility.

Recent advances in our understanding of child personality have been propelled by the creation of bottom-up, empirically based assessment tools to assess personality traits at an early age (Tackett, 2006). Much remains to be investigated in the assessment of child personality. Personality assessment of children brings about some unique challenges, such as the inherent difficulties in obtaining self-reports and the challenge to designate a criterion for judgments of accuracy. However, many of the issues raised with child personality assessment are not new to the area of child clinical assessment (Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987; De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005; Kraemer et al., 2003). In this article, I draw on adult personality research as well as child clinical research to examine agreement, disagreement, and clinical utility of mother and father informants for child personality.

INFORMANT AGREEMENT FOR CHILD PERSONALITY

Personality psychologists often rely on self-report information (Vazire, 2006), so it is not surprising that many investigations of informant reports for personality highlight self–other agreement (Vazire, 2010). Some researchers have criticized an overreliance on self-report information by personality psychologists (Kolar, Funder, & Colvin, 1996; Vazire, 2006, 2010). In contrast to the ubiquity of self-reports in adult personality research, collecting self-informant child personality data is resource intensive and typically suffers from limited reliability and validity. Thus, research with children is much more likely to utilize reports from informants (Achenbach et al., 1987; Kraemer et al., 2003). Parental informants represent a primary source of information about a child in many applied settings, such as clinics and schools. Thus, there is a need to better understand parental informants for child personality. Parents do possess attributes of “good informants” as they have access to extensive breadth and depth of information about the target, their child (Funder, Kolar, & Blackman, 1995).

One limitation to research on child personality assessment has previously been the absence of a suitable measure (Tackett, 2006). Specifically, temperament measures are frequently used for measuring individual differences early in life, whereas personality measures have primarily been developed and validated for adult populations. This leaves the middle portion of the life span, middle childhood, particularly untapped. Recently, researchers have developed validated empirical measures for gathering informant reports (e.g., from parents) of personality in this age group (Halverson et al., 2003; Mervielde & De Fruyt, 2002). These measures typically assess five broad traits (which are roughly analogous, but not identical, to the same traits in adulthood): neuroticism (the tendency to experience negative emotions such as sadness and anxiety), extraversion (tendencies toward sociability, positive emotions, and dominance), conscientiousness (tendencies toward orderliness, punctuality, and responsibility), agreeableness (the tendency to experience empathy and desire communal experiences), and openness to experience (the desire to experience new aesthetic, sensory, and cultural opportunities). These five broad traits form the framework for examining personality in this study.

Funder’s (1995) realistic accuracy model (RAM) highlights four important features for an accurate informant impression: relevance of the trait for the informant, availability of trait information to the informant, detection of this information, and utilization by the informant in forming an impression. General features of the parental role allow us to develop hypotheses related to the first two features. For example, childhood traits such as compliance, orderliness, and pleasantness are likely quite salient to parents, as they directly influence the ease and reward of parenting. Thus, we might expect conscientiousness and agreeableness to be the most relevant traits for these informants. In addition, extraversion is likely an extremely available trait for parents, so we would predict higher accuracy of extraversion ratings as well. Another trait that likely has high
availability to parents is intellect, which is a particularly salient component of openness to experience in childhood and is manifested by behaviors such as the child’s tendency to ask questions to better understand the world around him or her (Tackett et al., in press). Funder’s (1995) predictions about availability are consistent with examinations of parental agreement for child psychopathology, such that agreement is typically higher for externalizing problems, which are more observable, than for internalizing problems (Achenbach et al., 1987; De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005; Duhig, Renk, Epstein, & Phares, 2000) including mother–father informant pairs specifically (Seiffge-Krenke & Kollmar, 1998). One study found saliency to the parent, saliency to the child, and observability or willingness to report to be three primary components explaining levels of parent–child agreement for psychopathology (Karver, 2006).

Although previous research has included both parents as informants, no studies to date have explicitly examined mother–father agreement for child personality within a comprehensive framework of informant accuracy and agreement. One investigation reported this agreement for a college student sample (Funder et al., 1995). This study found mother–father agreement to be highest for neuroticism, followed by conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness, and lowest for openness to experience. A recent sample examining mother and father reports of temperament in middle childhood found a different pattern of agreement, with surgery (akin to extraversion) showing the highest agreement, followed by effortful control (akin to conscientiousness or constraint), and lowest agreement for negative affect (akin to neuroticism; Mullineaux, Deater-Deckard, Petrill, Thompson, & DeThorne, 2009). These findings are also consistent with longitudinal associations of parent-reported personality in middle childhood, which have found highest predictive validity for parent-reported constraint, followed by positive emotionality, and least predictive for negative emotionality (Tackett, Krueger, Iacono, & McGue, 2008) a pattern suggestive of the potential validity of parental ratings for these traits. Thus, mother–father agreement for child personality might follow a different pattern of convergence than it does in adulthood.

Another important issue to consider is the quality of the informant (Letzring, Wells, & Funder, 2006). Parental informants might show limitations of a good judge in that they might be motivated to cast the child in a positive light, but they also show features of a good judge by being motivated to respond thoughtfully and carefully (Funder, 1995; Vazire, 2010). Further, to the extent that parents employ a positivity bias, it is reasonable to expect that—on average—mothers and fathers would demonstrate the same bias, such that analyses investigating patterns of covariation and relative differences between parents should be relatively unaffected by such bias (De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005; Vazire, 2010). Similarly, mothers and fathers should generally have overlapping information about their child given that they see the child in the same settings. All of this should lead to moderate to high agreement between parents, with disagreement more likely reflecting different perspectives regarding the child’s personality traits (De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005). In addition, informants showing high agreement suggest that only one of the informants might be needed to provide the information (Achenbach et al., 1987). It is therefore important to determine whether an additional father report adds incremental variance in cases where a mother report is already available, which I examine in this study.

**Informant Disagreement for Child Personality**

Informant discrepancies are often considered standard in child clinical research (Achenbach, 2006; De Los Reyes, Alfano, & Beidel, 2010; De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005; Kraemer et al., 2003). More recently, researchers have demonstrated that the informant discrepancy variable is itself potentially important and predicts criteria such as problematic treatment outcomes and increased behavioral problems (e.g., De Los Reyes et al., 2010; Ferdinand, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2004). Discrepancies among informants might point to sources of conflict for the target individual (Achenbach, 2006). Informant discrepancies for childhood behavior show stability over time (De Los Reyes et al.), giving credibility to examining them as a distinct construct rather than simply disregarding them as measurement error. A better understanding of how to aggregate information from different informants remains one of the most important goals for improving clinical assessment with children and adolescents (Achenbach, 2006; Kraemer et al., 2003).

A number of studies are consistent with the idea that informant discrepancies might be indicative of underlying conflict (Grills & Olleodick, 2002). Specifically, one reason informants might not agree with one another could be problematic communication in the family system. In one study, mother–child discrepancies regarding externalizing behaviors predicted mother–child conflict and this relationship was mediated by maternal stress (De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2006). Another study found that children’s depressive symptoms were related to mother–child discrepancies in constructs related to parent and child communication (De Los Reyes, Goodman, Kliewer, & Reid-Quiones, 2008). Further, parent–child discrepancies on parenting predicted internalizing, but not externalizing problems (Guion, Mrug, & Windle, 2009). Treutler and Epkins (2003) found that the amount of time mothers spend with their children influences mother–father discrepancies on child internalizing symptoms. These studies suggest that informant discrepancies appear to be connected to a number of relevant domains in the family system, including communication, conflict, and parenting.

Of studies utilizing parent informants, the overwhelming majority utilize mother reports only (De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005; Duhig et al., 2000). As a result, much less is known about the utility that father reports might offer toward a broader understanding of child behavior (Phares, Fields, & Kamboukos, 2009; Renk & Phares, 2007). A meta-analysis found that mother–father discrepancies were slightly higher for total problems and internalizing behaviors than for externalizing behaviors (Duhig et al., 2000). Discrepancies on a variety of child-related constructs appear to predict adjustment (Guion et al., 2009). In this investigation these issues were addressed in two ways: first, by determining whether father reports are a useful complement to the ubiquitous mother reports, and second, by examining mother–father disagreement as a distinct construct in predicting child psychopathology.

**This Study**

In this study, I investigated the following research questions:

1. Does parental accuracy for child personality converge with other studies of informant reports for personality? Specifically, I hypothesized that agreement would be highest for traits that are relevant (conscientiousness and agreeableness)
and available (extraversion and, to a lesser extent, intellect) and lowest for traits that are difficult to observe (neuroticism).

2. Do both mother and father ratings of child personality provide incremental prediction of child psychopathology?

3. Do parental discrepancies on child personality predict child psychopathology?

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Participants were parents of 346 children primarily ages 9 and 10 years old ($M = 9.97$ years, $SD = 0.83$, range $7-13$) from a large metropolitan area in southern Ontario, Canada. Participants were recruited via a database maintained by a university psychology department of interested parents, ads placed in newspapers, and flyers posted around the community. Inclusion criteria included English language fluency; exclusion criteria included presence of a psychotic disorder or mental retardation in the target child. Participation rates were lower for fathers ($n = 226$) than for mothers ($n = 328$), primarily because data collection from a second caregiver (which was the father in most cases, although other secondary caregivers were also allowed to participate) was added several months after the study began. Given that the study hypotheses focus on the specific role of the informant, data from other types of caregivers (e.g., grandparent, second mother) were excluded from these analyses. Families were evenly split by gender of the target child (50.9% female). The sample was moderately diverse, with ethnicity of the target child evenly split by gender of the target child (50.9% female). The sample was moderately diverse, with ethnicity of the target child evenly split by gender of the target child (50.9% female).

**Measures and Procedure**

Both caregivers completed the Inventory for Child Individual Differences (ICID; Halverson et al., 2003), a 108-item measure designed to assess child personality. The ICID items make up five higher order personality factors and 15 lower order personality facets. Parents rated their child on a 7-point Likert scale for each item, ranging from 1 (much less than the average child or not at all) to 7 (much more than the average child). In this sample, internal consistencies were computed for lower order facets ($M \alpha = .86$, range $=.78-.92$) and higher order domains ($M \alpha = .80$, range $=.72-.87$).

Both caregivers additionally completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). The CBCL assesses three higher order problem domains: Externalizing Behaviors, Internalizing Behaviors, and Total Problems. The Total Problems score includes additional concerns such as social problems and attention problems that are not included in either Externalizing or Internalizing Behavior scores. In this sample, internal consistencies were computed for Internalizing Behaviors ($\alpha = .83$), Externalizing Behaviors ($\alpha = .88$), and Total Problems ($\alpha = .83$).

Participating families were involved in a larger research project examining the development of personality and behavioral outcomes. One caregiver and the child visited the lab to complete a series of interviews and behavioral tasks that are not included in this study. The second caregiver completed measures at home that were returned during the lab visit. Families were compensated $40 Canadian for participation in the full 2-hr lab visit and completing all questionnaires, and participating children received two small gifts. All study protocols and materials were approved by the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board.

**RESULTS**

Missing data were imputed using the maximum-likelihood based expectation-maximization algorithm in SPSS 17.0, including missing data from one caregiver as long as data from the other caregiver were present. Parental agreement as indexed by Pearson correlations for all higher and lower order traits was significant ($p < .01$). Agreement was similar for higher order and lower order traits. At the higher order level, parental convergence was highest for conscientiousness, followed by openness to experience and extraversion, and lowest for neuroticism and agreeableness (see Table 1). At the lower order level, the highest parental agreement was found for intellect, organized, achievement, and sociability. Parental agreement at the lower order level was lowest for fearfulness, antagonism, positive emotions, and considerate.

To examine relations between the ICID domains and the CBCL scale scores by parent, within-informant Pearson correlations were computed (see Table 2). These correlations demonstrate robust evidence for similar relationships across informants, particularly for Externalizing Behaviors and Total

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1.—Pearson correlations indexing mother–father agreement for higher and lower order child personality traits.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Higher Order Traits</td>
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<td>---------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Openness to experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
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<td>Agreeableness</td>
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Note. All correlations are significant at $p < .01$. All traits assessed using the Inventory for Child Individual Differences (Halverson et al., 2003).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>TABLE 2.—Within-informant Pearson correlations between Inventory for Child Individual Differences domains and Child Behavior Checklist scores.</th>
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<td>Openness to Experience</td>
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<td>-------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internalizing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Externalizing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fathers</td>
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<td>Internalizing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Externalizing</td>
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<td>Total problems</td>
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Note. Personality was measured using the Inventory for Child Individual Differences (Halverson et al., 2003); internalizing behaviors were measured using the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2003). *$p < .05$  **$p < .01$
Problems. Mother reports appeared to capture slightly more co-variation among the ICID domains and Internalizing Behaviors than did father reports. Evidence for incremental validity was investigated via a series of hierarchical regressions. Gender was controlled in all of the following analyses. Parental CBCL scores were averaged to create composites for Externalizing Behaviors, Internalizing Behaviors, and Total Problem scores. Each CBCL composite was designated the dependent variable in two hierarchical regression analyses, with all mother-rated Five Factor Model (FFM) scores entered in the first step and all father-rated FFM scores entered in the second step. Alternating the parental personality traits in each step allowed a direct test of the variance that each parent’s personality trait ratings added to the prediction of psychopathology above and beyond the other parent’s personality trait ratings (all \( \Delta R^2 \) were \( p < .001 \)).

In the prediction of Externalizing Behaviors, father’s ratings of child personality predicted 8\% additional variance after accounting for mother’s ratings, and mother’s ratings added 12\% additional variance after accounting for father’s ratings. For Internalizing Behaviors, father’s ratings added 3\% additional variance after accounting for mother’s ratings, and mother’s ratings added 15\% additional variance after accounting for father’s ratings. Finally, in terms of Total Problem scores, father’s personality ratings accounted for 6\% additional variance after accounting for mother’s ratings, and mother’s personality ratings accounted for 10\% additional variance after accounting for father’s ratings. Overall, mother’s personality ratings accounted for more incremental variance than did father’s personality ratings in accounting for child psychopathology. Importantly, however, both parents added significant additional information above and beyond that provided by the other parent.

To investigate the information provided by parent disagreement, standard difference scores (SDS) were computed for each higher order personality trait according to the procedures used by De Los Reyes et al. (2010). Specifically, all scale scores for mothers and fathers were converted to \( z \) scores, then father’s standardized scores were subtracted from mother’s standardized scores. A sample of cases demonstrating different patterns of mother–father SDS scores for child personality is presented in Figure 1. Cases of high convergence are represented by SDS scores close to zero (e.g., Case 2). Positive SDS scores reflect mother reports placing the child higher than average relative to the father’s placement of the child, whereas negative SDS scores reflect father reports placing the child higher than average relative to the mother’s placement of the child.

Ordinary least squares regressions were conducted with each composite CBCL score (Externalizing, Internalizing, and Total Problems) entered as the dependent variable; gender and all five SDS scores for the FFM were entered simultaneously as independent variables. Personality SDS scores were significant predictors for Internalizing Behaviors and Total Problems score, but not for Externalizing Behaviors. For Internalizing Behaviors, mother–father disagreement for Conscientiousness \( (\beta = .17, p < .05) \), Neuroticism \( (\beta = .36, p < .01) \), and Agreeableness \( (\beta = .29, p < .01) \) were all unique significant predictors (see Table 3). Specifically, gender and mother–father disagreement alone accounted for 8\% of the variance in child internalizing problems. For Total Problems score, only mother–father disagreement on Neuroticism \( (\beta = .21, p < .05) \) was a predictor.

DISCUSSION

These results demonstrated high mother–father agreement for both lower and higher order child personality traits, with agreement highest for Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience, and lowest for Neuroticism and Agreeableness. Both mothers’ and fathers’ child personality ratings added incremental prediction to internalizing, externalizing, and total problems, suggesting that each informant adds relevant unique variance in personality ratings. Finally, mother–father discrepancies in child personality ratings for Neuroticism, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness were important predictors of child internalizing problems. Taken together, these results suggest that both

![Figure 1](image)

**FIGURE 1.—Selection of four cases demonstrating different patterns of parental agreement as reflected by standard difference scores. SDSConsc = Conscientiousness standard difference score; SDSNeur = Neuroticism standard difference score; SDSExt = Extraversion standard difference score; SDSAg = Agreeableness standard difference score; SDSOpen = Openness to Experience standard difference score. Standard difference scores close to zero represent high mother–father agreement; positive values reflect a higher relative score from the mother; negative values reflect a higher relative score from the father.**

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<th>TABLE 3.—Standard difference scores for mother–father disagreement on child personality as predictors of child internalizing behaviors.</th>
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<tr>
<td>B [95% CI]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>C SDS</td>
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<td>O SDS</td>
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<td>E SDS</td>
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<td>N SDS</td>
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<td>A SDS</td>
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\( R^2 = .08 \)

Note. Personality was measured using the Inventory for Child Individual Differences (Halverson et al., 2003); internalizing behaviors were measured using the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). Standard difference scores reflect father’s standardized scale score subtracted from mother’s standardized scale score. CI = confidence interval; C SDS = Conscientiousness standard difference score; O SDS = Openness to Experience standard difference score; E SDS = Extraversion standard difference score; N SDS = Neuroticism standard difference score; A SDS = Agreeableness standard difference score. *\( p < .05 \), **\( p < .01 \).
parental informants are providing relevant and unique information in reporting on their child’s personality. Further, these findings make an important contribution to the literature on informant discrepancies by extending the importance of disagreement to child personality constructs for the first time.

Regarding parental agreement, my hypotheses were partially supported. Conscientiousness, Intellect, and Extraversion all showed strong agreement, as predicted and consistent with previous research (Mullineaux et al., 2009; Tackett et al., 2008). More surprising was the finding that parental agreement was lower for Agreeableness, as this seems to be a personality trait that would be quite relevant for parents. It is important to note that child agreeableness is often heavily assessed via traits of antagonism (Tackett et al., in press). This aspect of Agreeableness is more highly associated with Neuroticism, which was predicted to show lower agreement. The antagonistic aspects of Agreeableness might be more dependent on the specific relationship the child has with each parent, potentially resulting in divergent perceptions of the child’s trait level. It could also be the case that the emotional aspects of antagonism (e.g., anger, resentment) might be similar to Neuroticism in reflecting an internal, less observable trait.

Also as expected, these results suggest that fathers play an important role in the assessment of child personality, one that is neither redundant with the mother’s report nor consisting entirely of measurement error. These results suggest that the perspective offered by the father on the child’s personality holds unique predictive variance for all major domains of child psychopathology, particularly for externalizing problems. Further, the discrepancy between mother and father report was particularly relevant in the prediction of internalizing problems. Although the father’s report added the least incremental variance for internalizing problems (3%), the mother–father discrepancy additionally predicted 8% (including gender) of the variance in internalizing problems, suggesting that the overall incremental contribution by adding father’s report cannot be determined without additional examination of mother–father discrepancy. This finding was especially interesting given that informant agreement on child psychopathology tends to be lowest for all major domains of child psychopathology, particularly for externalizing problems. Although the father’s report added the least incremental variance for internalizing problems (3%), the mother–father discrepancy additionally predicted 8% (including gender) of the variance in internalizing problems, suggesting that the overall incremental contribution by adding father’s report cannot be determined without additional examination of mother–father discrepancy. This finding was especially interesting given that informant agreement on child psychopathology tends to be lowest for all major domains of child psychopathology, particularly for externalizing problems (Achenbach et al., 1987). The higher disagreement found for internalizing problems is often attributed to the decreased visibility of these symptoms relative to externalizing problems. It might be, however, that some informants are better at observing these symptoms than others, calling for a need to retain rather than eliminate such differences between informants for internalizing behaviors in particular. Specifically, informant-specific reports of child personality traits might provide more useful information in prediction of child internalizing problems because the disagreement of these symptoms is higher to begin with. These results suggest that these low levels of agreement for child personality do not necessarily reflect poor accuracy in prediction, as the disagreement itself can be quantified and becomes an important additional predictor.

Some limitations of this study are of note. First, the informants examined in this study play the same relational role to the target child, which likely results in largely overlapping information. This design allows a more specific investigation of mother and father perspectives, but future work incorporating informants from different contexts (e.g., teacher, clinician, self) and using different methods (e.g., observation) will continue to advance our understanding of the relative validity of sources of information on child personality. Second, the restricted age range offers careful examination of middle childhood, but it is likely that informant discrepancies change across development (Achenbach et al., 1987), as traits themselves change but also become more or less relevant and available to their judges (Tackett et al., 2008). Finally, a common limitation in much similar work is the lack of a “gold standard” for determining both accuracy (Funder, 1995; Vazire, 2010) and adjustment (De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005; Kraemer et al., 2003). In this study, I utilized an aggregate of adjustment problems, but this information was gleaned from the same parent informants used to rate the personality traits. Robust replication would be seen by examining the utility of mother reports, father reports, and their disagreement on child personality to predict behavioral outcomes measured by different sources.

The presence of informant discrepancies has multiple clinical implications. For example, the presence of discrepancies on child personality might create confusion in research and clinical settings when utilizing mean-level ratings to predict later behavior or to guide assessment and treatment. As previously noted, it is likely that the presence of informant discrepancies in some cases reflects underlying conflict in the family system or points to other sources of clinically relevant information that could prove useful in case conceptualization and treatment planning. It is also possible that mothers and fathers differentially evoke some relevant attributes of their child, which then hold important predictive value. The roles of mothers and fathers do differ in a number of important ways. For example, mothers spend more time with their children on average than do fathers, and fathers show higher levels of comfort interacting with their children in domains such as discipline and play (Phares et al., 2009). Such differences could affect variables such as information quantity and quality (Letzring et al., 2006), which then impact personality assessment.

A third possibility for informant discrepancies might be that some children are more consistent or “easier to read” than others: Consistent children might evoke a more stable and positive environment, thus leading to better adjustment. These explanations are consistent with the importance of relationship, actor, and partner effects in explaining expressed positivity and negativity in parent–child interactions (Rashbash, Jenkins, O’Connor, Tackett, & Reiss, 2011). Future research should aim to better disentangle potential mechanisms leading to agreement or disagreement in child personality assessment. In an applied setting, such as the school or clinic, we could imagine that our approach to working with the four children (and their parents) in Figure 1 might be quite different. In middle childhood, our work with children often necessarily involves the family system. Knowledge of informant discrepancies such as these should not be considered noise and dismissed as measurement error (Achenbach et al., 1987; Ferdinand et al., 2004). Individuals in both research and applied settings should take care to investigate and consider informant discrepancies just as closely as the averaged information gathered from the informants.

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