

## Associations Between Interparental Relationships and Experiences of Parenting Stress Among Mothers: The Mediating Role of Perceived Control

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### **Abstract:**

The current study investigated the potential benefits of relationships between parents whose children were friends (closure relationships) within a sample of 404 mothers. Associations between closure and three domains of parenting stress were explored. Mothers' perceived control was considered as a potential mediator of closure-stress associations. Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that higher mean levels of closure were associated with lower levels of parenting stress related to child problem behaviors. Perceived control mediated the association between closure and parenting stress. The benefits of cross-household parental relationships for mothers' psychological wellbeing are discussed.

**Keywords:** closure, parenting, stress

### **Article:**

Mothers are more likely than fathers to take day-to-day responsibility for the care and supervision of children (Bianchi & Raley, 2005; Coltrane, 2000). Accordingly, it is of interest to consider factors that may support or undermine mothers' abilities to provide optimal caregiving environments for their children. Mothers' psychological well-being and parenting behaviors influence (directly and indirectly) children's adjustment and development (Amato & Fowler, 2002). Warm and responsive parenting, especially when expressed in conjunction with high levels of behavioral control and consistency, is linked to positive developmental outcomes among children (e.g., Coplan, Findlay, & Nelson, 2004). Optimal parenting, however, can be compromised when mothers experience high levels of stress. Mothers who report high levels of stress tend to display less warmth and responsiveness when interacting with their children (Bonds, Gondoli, Sturge-Apple, & Salem, 2002; Gondoli & Silverberg, 1997). High levels of stress also increase the potential for harsh, and even abusive, forms of discipline (Crouch & Behl, 2001). In addition to the negative effects of stress on parenting, levels of parental stress are associated directly and negatively with children's social competence and engagement in socially desirable behaviors (Anthony et al., 2005; Barry et al., 2005) and associated positively with children's internalizing and externalizing behavior (Costa et al., 2006).

Elevated levels of stress also have implications for maternal well-being. Greater exposure to daily stressors increases women's risk for physical illness and depressive symptoms (Cicchetti, Rogosch, & Toth, 1998; Mallers, Almeida, & Neupert, 2005). Reducing mothers' stress levels has potential positive implications for maternal well-being, parenting behaviors, and child adjustment.

Higher levels of social support attenuate associations between stress and psychological adjustment (see review by Taylor, 2007). Not surprisingly, mothers who experience higher levels of emotional and instrumental support also tend to feel less stressed and more efficacious in the parenting role (Bonds et al., 2002; Izzo et al., 2000) and have more positive parent-child interactions (Rodgers, 1998; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). Existing research linking social support to parenting has tended to focus on global perceptions of support. A few studies have considered support from family members and close friends (Kim & McKenry, 1998). The impact of support

derived from relationships with other parents has been virtually ignored. The current study focused on social relationships among mothers whose children were friends in relation to levels of parenting stress, as well as identification of mechanisms that might explain associations between maternal social relationships and parenting stress.

## **BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE**

The concept of *social network*, or *intergenerational closure* has its origins in the theoretical writings of Coleman (1988) as they relate to social capital in the lives of families. Social network closure is defined as the extent to which relationships exist between parents whose children are friends. Coleman theorized that closure relationships were important in that they reinforced social norms and promoted the use of consistent and effective parenting within communities. Closure relationships were described as reinforcing the “trustworthiness of social structures that allows for the proliferation of obligations and expectations” (Coleman, 1988, p. S107). Thus, it is through reciprocal ties and obligations that parents are held accountable to other parents in their social networks.

Theoretically, closure relationships should benefit mothers and fathers alike. However, childrearing remains highly gendered within contemporary American society, with women shouldering a disproportionate amount of childcare responsibility, even within dual-earner families (Bianchi & Raley, 2005; Coltrane, 2000). Furthermore, mothers typically assume the lead role as planners and organizers of family schedules, including children’s time after school (Daly, 2002). Thus, the benefits of closure relationships are likely to be more salient in the lives of mothers. For this reason, the current study examined closure relationships as they function in the lives of mothers.

The existing body of research on social network closure has focused primarily on its impact on child well-being, and has indicated that closure relationships are associated positively with child competence within a number of domains (Carbonaro, 1998; Fletcher, Hunter, & Eanes, 2006; Fletcher et al., 2001). Yet less is known about the ways in which closure relationships may affect parents. Coleman (1988) theorized that closure relationships benefited parents by reinforcing standards and sanctions based on social norms. Having relationships with other parents who share similar discipline strategies and parenting beliefs, for example, should enable mothers to feel more confident and less stressed in the parenting role. Research on social support conceptualized in a broader manner has suggested that supportive social networks are associated concurrently with lower maternal stress levels (Bonds et al., 2002; Jackson et al., 2000; Ostberg & Hagekull, 2000). Also, in a prospective study of mothers of young children, Mulsow et al., (2002) found that social support predicted levels of parenting stress over a two-year time span. Social network closure should function similarly to general forms of social support in that lower levels of closure should be related to less optimal functioning among mothers (i.e., higher levels of stress). Because closure relationships are parenting-specific, greater amounts of closure should be linked with benefits with regards to stress experienced within the parenting role.

Given that existing research suggests a relation between closure and stress, it was of interest to consider the mechanisms through which social network closure may relate to maternal stress levels. Cognitive appraisals may influence the extent to which individuals experience life events as stressful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the present study, we examined levels of perceived control as a potential cognitive mediator of the link between closure and parenting stress. Several studies have shown that supportive social ties have the potential to influence positively mothers’ levels of perceived control (Hassall, Rose, & McDonald, 2005; Izzo et al., 2000). In a related longitudinal study, Sepa, Frodi, and Ludvigsson (2004) found that mothers’ reports of inadequate social support predicted later reports of feeling less confident/secure in the parenting role. In addition, lack of support and confidence/security predicted higher levels of parenting stress. Similar to research involving more general measures of maternal support networks, access to resources via closure relationships should increase mothers’ feelings of control with respect to children’s behavior.

In turn, higher levels of perceived control should provide mothers with greater cognitive resources to cope with stressful parenting events and situations. In two studies, mothers’ perceptions of control explained a significant

portion of the variance in their stress levels (Hassall, Rose, & McDonald, 2005; Raikes & Thompson, 2005). Moreover, Hassall, Rose, and McDonald (2005) found that perceived control mediated the association between total support received from family and friends and parenting stress. Taken together, these findings suggest that support gained through interparental relationships decreases levels of felt stress because mothers feel more in control as parents.

The current study makes an important contribution by considering an understudied source of parenting support, namely interparental relationships and how they might benefit mothers by reducing levels of parenting stress. Drawing from empirical findings within the social support and parenting literatures, as well as the theoretical writings of Coleman (1988), we tested the following hypotheses: (1) higher levels of social network closure are associated with lower amounts of parenting stress; (2) levels of perceived control mediate the association between closure and parenting stress.

## **METHODS**

### ***Participants***

The sample for the current study consisted of 404 third-grade children and their mothers. Interviews took place during the 2001–2002 school year. Children attended nine public elementary schools that were diverse with respect to location (urban, suburban, rural) and racial and socioeconomic composition. Elementary schools were from one county in the southeastern region of the United States.

The families included in analyses for the current study were a subset of mother-child dyads participating in a larger, school-based study of parental involvement in children's friendships. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for data collection was obtained prior to participant recruitment. Parents were contacted initially through letters distributed to all third-grade children in the participating schools ( $N = 877$ ). Seven hundred forty-four children were considered eligible, and 85% of eligible children's mothers consented to their child's participation in the school-based portion of the study. Eligibility to participate in the home-based portion of the study was determined using demographic information provided by children during school-based data collection. To be eligible, mothers had to reside with participating children; children had to be born in the United States; and participants had to self-identify as either Black or White. Eligible mothers who could be reached by telephone ( $N = 511$ ) were asked to confirm eligibility requirements. Seventy-nine percent of mothers who were eligible agreed to participate in home interviews.

### ***Measures***

***Demographic information.*** During a face-to-face interview, mothers provided the following information for each household member: age in years, sex, ethnicity, and relationship to the target child. Child gender was coded as 0 = female, 1 = male; race was coded as 0 = White, 1 = Black. Mothers also reported both parents' occupations and educational attainment. If biological/adoptive fathers were not perceived to be involved with the target child, their information was not recorded. Family social class was determined using the Hollingshead Four Factor Index of Social Status (Hollingshead, 1975), which takes into account both parents' education and occupation. Hollingshead scores can range from 8 (farm laborers/mental service workers) to 66 (major business persons and professionals). As per Hollingshead's instructions, only mothers' scores were used to compute social class when biological/adoptive fathers were not actively involved in raising target children.

***Social network closure.*** Children and mothers were asked to work together during a joint interviewer-guided session to identify a list of the target child's closest friends. The generated list was limited to non-sibling, non-adult friends and a maximum of 10 friends could be identified. Mothers were then asked to rate how well they knew each identified friend's parents. Responses were on a four-point scale with 1 (*Never met*), 2 (*Met in passing*), 3 (*Know somewhat well*), and 4 (*Know well*). Mothers' responses for each friendship were averaged to form a summary measure of closure that was not biased by the number of friends identified. Smaller scores were indicative of lower levels and larger scores were indicative of higher levels of social network closure. Closure measured in this manner has been linked with multiple indicators of child well-being including

academic grades, perceived self-efficacy, internalized distress and externalizing behavior (Fletcher, Hunter, & Eanes, 2006), demonstrating criterion-related validity (Carmines & Zeller, 1979).

**Parenting stress.** Mothers completed the short form of the Parenting Stress Index (PSI; Abidin, 1995) as a measure of mothers' experiences of stress related to parenting. The PSI is composed of three subscales (parent domain, parent-child dysfunctional interaction, and difficult child). Parent domain items were designed to measure parenting-specific experiences of stress. Parent-child dysfunctional interaction items were designed to measure stress related to unmet parental expectations of children. Difficult child items were designed to measure stress related to parents' perceptions of child behavior problems. All subscales have been demonstrated to have good test-retest reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .85, .68, and .78, respectively, see Abidin, 1995, p. 61). Mothers indicated their agreement with statements such as, "I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent" (parent domain), "Sometimes my child does things that bother me just to be mean" (parent-child dysfunctional interaction), and "I feel that my child is very moody and easily upset" (difficult child). Responses were on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Higher scores on all subscales indicated higher stress levels related to parenting.

**Perceived control.** Mothers completed the parental control of child's behavior (10 items, Cronbach's alpha = .77) subscale of the Parental Locus of Control Scale (PLOC; Campis, Lyman, & Prentice-Dunn, 1986). Mothers indicated the extent to which they agreed with statements such as "My child's behavior is sometimes more than I can handle" and "Sometimes I feel that I do not have enough control over the direction my child's life is taking." Responses were on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores were indicative of higher levels of parental control, also indicative of an internal orientation. This measure has been shown to have good reliability for all subscales, and to demonstrate acceptable construct and discriminant validity when examined in conjunction with other locus of control measures (Campis, Lyman, & Prentice-Dunn, 1986).

### **Procedures**

Two research assistants conducted each interview with mothers, and at least one of the research assistants was always from the same racial group as the family being interviewed. For every interview, at least one research assistant was female. The majority of interviews were conducted in the families' homes, although a few families were interviewed in alternative locations of their choosing (e.g., a library). Interviews were completed in approximately one hour and fifteen minutes. At the beginning of each interview, mothers were asked to sign informed consent forms for their own and their children's participation. Children verbally assented to participate. For purposes of confidentiality, mothers and children were interviewed in separate rooms. Mothers' interviews began with a demographics interview followed by completion of self-report questionnaires. Research assistants read questionnaires aloud to children. Questionnaires were read aloud to mothers if mothers requested assistance or appeared to be having trouble with completion. In the final portion of the interview, mothers and children worked together to complete the Social Contexts of Friendships Measure. At the end of each interview, children received a small school-related gift and mothers were compensated with \$35.00.

### **Analytic Strategy**

We computed the mean, standard deviation, and range for all continuous descriptive and key model variables and frequency counts for categorical variables. Values for skewness and kurtosis were assessed to determine normality of scale variables. To identify potential demographic confounding variables, we determined bivariate associations between demographic variables and our independent and dependent variables. We controlled for demographic variables that showed significant associations at the  $p < .05$  level with any of our key model variables. Data were analyzed using hierarchical multiple regression with parenting stress as the outcome variable. We tested separate models for each parenting stress subscale (difficult child, parent-child interactions, and parent domain). The significance of the  $F$  statistic was used to determine overall model fit. The significance and magnitude of associations between independent and dependent variables were determined by examining the  $t$  statistic and change in  $R$  square respectively.



On the first step of each regression, we entered the demographic variables of mother’s age, ethnicity, and social class. On the second step, we entered closure to determine whether closure was associated with levels of parenting stress over and above the effects of demographic variables. In the third step, we entered perceived control to see if the association between closure and stress would be reduced (i.e., mediation was present). To test for mediation, we followed the steps recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, to determine whether the independent variable was associated with the mediator variable we examined the partial correlation between closure and perceived control, taking into account effects of demographic variables. Second, to determine whether the mediator variable was associated with the outcome variables, we examined partial correlations between perceived control and each domain of parenting stress, again taking into account demographic variables. Third, to determine whether the independent variable was associated with the dependent variables, we performed the aforementioned regression with closure as the independent variable and parenting stress subscales as the criterion variables (with demographic variables as controls, making this conceptually and mathematically equivalent to a partial correlation coefficient). Finally, we considered whether the associations between closure and each domain of parenting stress changed when perceived control was taken into account. Separate mediational analyses were conducted for each parenting stress domain that met criteria for mediation, as tested in prior steps. If the relations between independent (closure) and dependent (parenting stress) variables were reduced to below significance levels once the potential mediator was entered into the equation, complete mediation was considered to be present. If the associations between the independent and dependent variables were reduced, but not to below significance levels, then partial mediation was considered to be present (Baron & Kenny, 1986). If partial or complete mediation was present, follow-up bootstrapping procedures were used to test the significance of the indirect paths (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Interactions between closure and race were not examined in the current investigation because empirical evidence does not suggest that the strength of associations between social support and stress differs by race (Peirce et al., 2000). Due to insufficient variability in our sample, we were unable to examine family structure as a moderator of closure-stress associations.

## RESULTS

Approximately 63% of mother-child dyads self-identified as White and 37% as Black. These were the two largest racial groups in this county. Among the children, 48% were boys and 52% were girls. Mothers were between 23 and 52 years of age (mean age = 36.9 years, SD = 5.46). Two hundred eighty-six mothers (70.8%) were married to participating children’s biological or adoptive fathers, 94 (23.3%) were single, and 24 (5.9%) were married to participating children’s stepfathers. Families’ social class scores ranged from 9 (unskilled laborers) to 66 (major business persons and professionals). The average social class score was 43 (medium business personnel and minor professionals) with a standard deviation of 11.6. All scale measures were within acceptable ranges for skewness and kurtosis (Table 1).

**TABLE 1** Descriptive Statistics for Mother Background Variables, Closure, Perceived Control, and Indicators of Parenting Stress

Variables	<i>M</i>	SD	Range	<i>N</i>
Closure	3.21	.65	1–4	403
Perceived control	4.61	.70	1.3–6	404
Parenting stress—DC	24.92	7.32	12–55	404
Parenting stress—PCDI	19.90	5.88	12–42	404
Parenting stress—PD	23.48	6.66	0–44	404
Maternal age (years)	36.98	5.46	23–52	403
Social status	42.89	11.61	9–66	404

*Note.* Parenting stress domains are DC = difficult child, PCDI = parent-child dysfunctional interaction, and PD = parent domain.

Social status was associated negatively with parenting stress in the parent-child dysfunctional interaction domain ( $r = -.20, p < .01$ ) and parent domain ( $r = -.11, p = .03$ ), and positively with closure ( $r = .20, p < .01$ ). White mothers tended to have higher mean levels of closure ( $r = .19, p < .01$ ) and lower levels of perceived control ( $r = -.23, p < .01$ ). Mother’s age was associated negatively with levels of perceived control ( $r = -.11, p = .02$ ). Child’s gender was unrelated to all of our model variables. Thus, we retained the following variables in all analyses: mother’s social status, race, and age.

Intercorrelations among model variables (Table 2) indicated that mothers with higher mean levels of closure tended to have lower levels of stress on all three subscales. Closure scores were unrelated to perceived control. Higher levels of perceived control were associated with lower levels of parenting stress on all subscales. Mothers' parenting stress scores were intercorrelated positively with all subscales.

To determine if mothers' closure scores were associated with levels of parenting stress, above and beyond potential demographic controls, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis strategy was used. After controlling for age, race, and social class, a trend was observed for mothers higher in closure to report lower levels of parenting stress related to the parent-child relationship,  $t(402) = -1.89, p = .06$ . Higher mean levels of closure were associated with lower levels of parenting stress related to child behavior problems,  $t(402) = -2.12, p = .04$ . Closure was unrelated to parenting stress in the parent domain subscale once demographic variables were considered.

To test our mediation hypothesis, we followed the steps recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). It was expected that mothers' perceived control scores would mediate the association between closure and parenting stress. First, to determine if a significant association existed between the independent and mediator variable, we examined the partial correlation as described previously. Results indicated that higher mean levels of closure were associated with higher levels of perceived control over and above effects of demographic controls,  $r(402) = .11, p = .04$ . To determine if a significant association existed between the mediator (perceived control) and dependent variables, partial correlations between perceived control and parenting stress were examined. Mothers with higher levels of perceived control had lower levels of parenting stress related to perceptions of a difficult child,  $r(403) = -.62, p < .01$ , parent-specific issues,  $r(403) = -.39, p < .01$ , and parent-child dysfunctional interactions,  $r(403) = -.52, p < .01$ . To determine if a significant association existed between the independent and dependent variables (after controlling for demographic variables), we examined three separate regressions, as described previously, with closure as the independent variable and parenting stress subscales as the outcome variables. Because associations between closure and two of the three parenting stress subscales (parent-child dysfunctional interaction, parent domain) did not reach significance at the  $p < .05$  level, they were not considered for mediational analyses. Higher mean levels of closure were associated with lower levels of parenting stress related to child problem behaviors,  $t(402) = -2.10, p = .04$ . In the final step of the regression equation, the association between the independent and dependent variable must be reduced to below significance once potential mediators are entered into the equation to establish that full mediation is present (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The association between closure and parenting stress (difficult child subscale) was reduced to below significance levels,  $t(398) = -1.04, p = .30$ , once perceived control was entered as an independent variable (Figure 1). Thus, perceived control mediated completely the association between closure and parenting stress related to a difficult child.

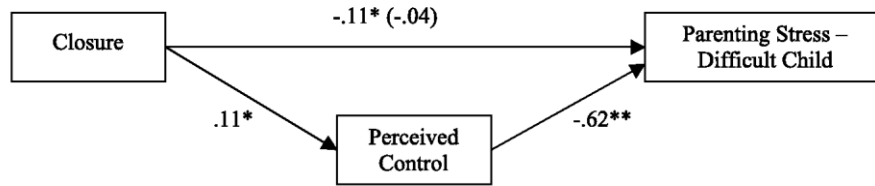
**TABLE 2** Pearson Product-Moment Correlations Among Closure, Perceived Control, and Indicators of Parenting Stress

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
Social network closure	—	.06 (403)	-.10* (403)	-.12* (403)	-.11* (403)
Perceived control		—	-.62** (404)	-.50** (404)	-.39** (404)
Parenting stress—DC			—	.61** (404)	.47** (404)
Parenting stress—PCDI				—	.55** (404)
Parenting stress—PD					—

*Note.* Sample sizes indicated within parentheses. Parenting stress domains are DC = difficult child, PCDI = parent-child dysfunctional interaction, and PD = parent domain. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

Preacher and Hayes (2004) suggest a bootstrapping approach to test the significance of indirect paths. This procedure was designed to accommodate non-normality in the distribution for the direct path and small sample

sizes. Five thousand random samples (with replacement) were drawn from our original sample of 404 mothers and the indirect path of closure on stress (difficult child subscale) through perceived control was recalculated for each sample drawn. A 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the average indirect effect was then used to determine significance; confidence intervals including 0 were considered nonsignificant. Bootstrapping procedures indicated that the indirect path of closure on stress through perceived control was statistically significant, controlling for demographic variables, CI D  $-1.40, -.10$  (Table 3).



**FIGURE 1** Perceived control as a mediator of associations between closure and parenting stress ( $N = 402$ ). \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ . Note. Values in parentheses are standardized beta coefficients after adding perceived control as a predictor of parenting stress in hierarchical regression analyses. Mother's age, ethnicity, and social class were controlled.

**TABLE 3** Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Associated with Mothers' Perceived Levels of Stress in the Difficult Child Domain ( $N = 402$ )

Variable	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$
Social status	-.04	.03	-.07	-.03	.04	-.05	-.02	.03	-.03
Mother's ethnicity	1.65*	.85	.11*	1.86*	.85	.12*	-.46	.69	-.03
Mother's age	-.04	.07	-.03	-.04	.07	-.03	-.09	.06	-.07
Social network closure				-1.21*	.57	-.11*	-.46	.46	-.04
Perceived control							-6.64**	.43	-.63**
$R^2$	.01			.02			.39		
<i>F</i> for change in $R^2$	1.40			2.18 <sup>a</sup>			51.10**		
Indirect effects							-.75*		

Note. Mean indirect effect of closure on stress via perceived control was  $-.75$  with a 95% confidence interval of  $-1.40$  to  $-.10$  ( $n = 403$ ).

<sup>a</sup> $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

## DISCUSSION

The goal of the current study was to investigate associations between closure and multiple domains of parenting stress (difficult child, parent-child interactions, parent domain). Our findings indicated that mothers with higher levels of closure tended to report lower levels of parenting stress related to their own perceptions of having a difficult child. The association between closure and stress related to parent-child interactions approached, but did not reach, significance at the  $p < .05$  level. Closure was unrelated to stress in the parent domain. Mothers' levels of perceived control mediated the association between closure and parenting stress in the difficult child domain.

### *Associations Between Closure and Parenting Stress*

Our results suggested that the benefits of closure to mothers might be domain specific, as closure was most strongly associated with reductions in levels of stress specifically associated with child behavior problems. That closure had more of an impact in one stress domain than in others is not surprising given the nature of closure relationships. In contrast to other types of inter-parental relationships, friendships between mothers whose children are friends are likely to be initiated as a consequence of an existing relationship between children. Exchanges between mothers are therefore likely to focus on child-centered issues (i.e., school activities, childrearing strategies, sleepovers).

This is consistent with Coleman's (1988) contention that closure relationships have implications for parents' childrearing strategies, particularly monitoring and guiding children's behavior. Because childrearing themes are likely to be prominent in parental dialogues, advice and support received within the context of such

relationships are likely to have the strongest impact on parents' stress levels associated with these issues. Generally speaking, these findings are consistent with those of other studies reporting that mothers who received greater amounts of support were less stressed (Bonds et al., 2002; Jackson et al., 2000).

Why was closure less strongly associated with parenting stress in the parent-child and parent domains? It could be that, as a result of the child-centered focus of conversations between mothers, mothers came to perceive difficulties with their own children's behavior as normative. As a result, mothers may have become more inclined to disclose childrearing concerns as they relate to child behaviors. Parent-child conflicts and parent-centered issues may be considered private, or simply child-specific, and consequently dealt with inside the home rather than within the context of closure relationships. In this sample, nearly 77% of mothers were married. Perhaps mothers relied on spousal support to resolve these issues first, before consulting outside sources.

### *The Mediating Role of Perceived Control*

Mothers often are presented with numerous challenging and unpredictable life events related to childrearing, which may lead to feelings of stress. Yet not all mothers perceive the parenting role to be highly stressful. The current effort considered perceived control as a potential mechanism through which closure impacts mothers' stress levels. Results provided support for perceived control as a mediator of the association between closure and parenting stress. In other words, mothers higher in closure tended to feel less stressed because they had higher levels of perceived control. One potential interpretation of this finding is that mothers who maintained stronger closure relationships experienced validation of existing parenting beliefs and felt empowered simply because their parenting efforts were supported by other mothers. Another interpretation is that mothers who maintained stronger closure relationships received additional information regarding their children's behavior and involvement in activities outside the home, providing mothers with a greater sense of parental control. When mothers feel as though they can effectively manage their children's behavior, they may feel less stressed by the demands of raising children. Self-appraisals have been well documented as highly influential in the lives of parents, particularly as they relate to parenting quality (Coleman & Karraker, 1997). Stressful situations are less likely to have adverse affects on parenting behavior for highly efficacious mothers (Gondoli & Silverberg, 1997).

### *Limitations and Directions for Further Research*

This study represents a first empirical attempt to investigate if closure relationships influence aspects of maternal well-being, as opposed to children's. While we recognize the multifaceted nature of adult support networks in general, the goal of this study was to isolate and begin to understand how one form of support (i.e., closure) functions in the lives of mothers. Our work was framed by the theoretical writings of Coleman (1988) who speculated about the potential benefits of closure relationships for parents. This study contributes to a growing body of literature that considers how mothers may benefit from support experienced outside of the immediate family. Yet this study was not without its limitations.

A first limitation was the cross-sectional nature of the design. Our results have suggested a pathway whereby mothers with higher levels of closure were less stressed because they felt more in control. Yet it might also be that mothers who were less stressed to begin with were more likely to initiate relationships with other parents because they were less preoccupied with psychological distress symptoms. Also, mothers who perceived higher levels of parenting control may have been less reliant on external support networks, thus they might have been less inclined to seek out closure relationships. Longitudinal data are required before we will be able to draw clear conclusions concerning the temporal relations between variables of interest in this study. Furthermore, because children initially provided eligibility information about their mothers for inclusion in our study, eligible mothers may have been excluded unintentionally due to inaccuracies in their children's reports on demographic screening forms. This provides a threat to the external validity of our sample and thus the findings presented here should be replicated with more representative samples in further research.



Perceived control and parenting stress were both measured using mother self-reports on questionnaires. This presented possible bias due to social acceptability of self-report and to shared methods (Bank et al., 1990), which can distort observed associations between variables. Future studies should consider the use of multiple methods to minimize this validity threat (Kenny & Kashy, 1992). Because children and mothers worked together to select friends' names to which mothers' indicated their relationships with those friends' parents, mono-method bias was less likely present in closure-stress associations.

It is also possible that the extent to which mothers were likely to maintain closure relationships in the first place was dependent on factors not assessed within the current effort. Extroversion, for example, has been linked with greater sociability and interpersonal warmth among adults (Vondra & Belsky, 1993). Thus, highly extroverted mothers may have been more likely to initiate closure relationships, and thus more likely to experience the potential benefits of these relationships. Further studies might consider mothers' personality characteristics as they relate to mothers' efforts to initiate and sustain interparental relationships.

Levels of parenting stress were certainly lower in our sample than they might have been in a sample selected with parenting risk in mind. It may be that closure relationships function differently or have different correlates among at-risk mothers or within families with different demographic characteristics than those represented within our sample. Unfortunately, our data were not well suited to examine family structure as a potential moderator of closure-stress associations. Given the manner in which our data were coded, it is very possible that some mothers would have been miscategorized as "single" or "other" when, in fact, they were living within the context of a "two-adult" or "extended" family. Our intention within the current research effort was to document the nature of associations among closure, parenting stress, and perceived control within a sample of African American and European American mothers of third-grade children. Further research on this topic should consider whether the pattern of associations observed varies among mothers who differ according to such characteristics as race/ethnicity, social class, family structure, parenting risk, geographical location, and child age.

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