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Reconceptualising Toddler Aggression

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ABSTRACT

This study used sorting techniques and Multidimensional Scaling analyses (MDS) to interrogate the comprehensiveness of a toddler aggression construct - Aggressive Behavior (AGG) - as empirically defined by the Child Behavior Checklist for Two and Three-year-olds (CBCL/2-3). MDS provided a way of unravelling the latent dimensional structures of the checklist item set and creating an inter-item semantic-like map. This map acted as a tool in the summary of patterns in sets of archival CBCL toddler data to reveal latent coherence or dimensional consistency across toddlerhood with specific regard to the aggression or aggressive-like behaviour construct – the main research goal of the present study.

First New Zealand participants (N=70, $\underline{x}$=30 years) completed four independent semantic-like matching tasks by sorting CBCL/2-3 checklist items according to their "face value". MDS algorithms transformed individual data into a map and hierarchical trees (h-trees) showing inter-item proximities. After validation of the map clusters sets of archival CBCL data were represented and interpreted in the 5-dimensional MDS solution (P=5) as vectors using PROFIT analysis. A measure of the stability of the vector components in terms of the amount of common variance captured across 24 to 42 months - of – age, demonstrated better fit than CBCL subscale stability for the first three dimensions. Candidates for dimensional stability across toddlerhood indicated by the MDS analyses and map were suggested.

Replication of the toddler map, the second objective, involved creating an expanded item set that included items from the CBCL/4-18. The new Combined item set was then sorted following identical procedures by a different group (N=49, x=30). PROFIT analyses of archival 4-18 data on the rotated Combined configuration was compared with stability of Achenbach's CBCL/4-18 subscales between 60-months- and 72-months-of-age but correlations were no better than chance. Additional analyses were undertaken that revealed the archival CBCL/4-18 items had little variance when interpreted in the MDS solution.

This study succeeded in identifying alternative candidates for continuity of aggressive - like behaviour across toddlerhood in patterns in raw CBCL data that may contribute to

the reported CBCL/2-3 Aggressive Behavior construct stability. Three alternative constructs are suggested: a construct which features high frustration, anger and resistance to control - believed to interact with punitive or restrictive parenting practices, and central in theories of the development of coercive parent-child relationships; a construct which appears to index insecure attachment styles; and a construct reflecting toddlers' developing ability to control their attention and behaviour.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Appendices	viii
List of Figures	ix
List of Tables	x
CHAPTER ONE: Introduction	1
Problem and aims of research	1
Delimitations	4
Significance of the study	5
Thesis overview	5
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review	7
Part One: Description of the Child Behavior Checklist	7
The Child Behavior Checklist /4-18 and 2-3 and the Aggressive Behavior Syndrome (AGG)	8
Model origins: conceptual categories and quantitative assessment	10
Validation process	11
The Broad-band Scales: a dimensional model of childhood emotional and behaviour problems	12
Part Two: Taxonomies of child disruptive and antisocial behaviour	13
The DSM and aggression	13
The CBCL Aggressive Behavior Syndrome (AGG)	16
Part Three: Theoretical concerns	20
Developmental definition of aggression in toddlerhood and early childhood	20
Stability of aggression	25
The CBCL and concepts of stability and continuity	27
Models of the development of child aggression and antisocial behaviour	30

Child characteristics..... 32
Parental characteristics..... 35
Parent-child relationship characteristics..... 35
Coercive relationships 36
Attachment..... 36
Integrative models..... 38
Parent-temperament interactions..... 40
Ethological studies..... 41
Dynamic systems research..... 42

Part Four: Methodological concerns..... 43
Concerns with parent report measures..... 43
Concerns about sample selection..... 45
Methodological concerns..... 46
Syndrome derivation..... 47
Concerns about covariance between scales 48
Comprehensiveness of the CBCL item set..... 48
Integrating information from multiple informants..... 52
Threshold setting and scale discriminant validity..... 53
Concerns with replicability and coherence of the CBCL syndrome model..... 55
Summary of methodological concerns..... 56

Part Five: Conceptual overlap with personality structure dimensions 58
Ego-undercontrol/Ego-overcontrol Model..... 59
Extraversion..... 60
The Five Factor Model: Agreeableness and Conscientiousness..... 61
Frustration and Surgency..... 61
Resistant Temperament..... 62
Inhibitory Control and Effortful Control..... 63
Attachment and temperament..... 63
Summary of Part Five..... 64
Summary of Literature Review..... 64

CHAPTER THREE: Methodology 66
Research Objectives 66
Stimuli 67
Participants 67
Ethical considerations 68
Research Procedures 68
Similarity data 68
Tasks One and Two 68
Task Three 69
Ranking data 69
Task Four 69
Ratings data 70
Task Five 70
Participants 71
Rationale for use of procedures 71
Analytical method: Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) 73
Rationale for use of MDS 74
Applications 75
Multidimensional Scaling 75
Canonical correlation 76
Limitations 77
Procedures 77
Analytical methods 77
Communication of results 78
Analyses 78
Hierarchical clustering and Mapping 79
Vector Analyses 80
Summary 81

CHAPTER FOUR: Results 82
Part One: Multidimensional scaling analysis of the CBCL/2-3 items set 82
Results of Method of Triads (MoT) validation of map structure 89
Part Two: Validation of mapgroups and dimensions 90

Regression Analysis 1. (MOSS data)..... 92
Part Three: Integration of archival raw CBCL/2-3 data into the map of the CBCL toddler problem domain..... 94
Regression Analysis 2. (CBCL subscale scores)..... 95
Part Four: Multidimensional scaling analyses of Combined (CBCL/2-3 and CBCL/4-18) item set..... 97
Part Five: Integration of archival raw CBCL/4-18 data into the map of the Combined (CBCL/2-3 and CBCL/4-18) item set..... 101
Additional analyses..... 101

CHAPTER FIVE: Discussion and Concluding Remarks..... 103
Part One: Discussion of the MDS analysis of the Child Behavior Checklist for 2- and 3-year-olds (CBCL/2-3)..... 103
Dimension 1..... 104
Dimension 2..... 108
Dimension 3..... 109
Dimension 4..... 111
Dimension 5..... 111
Discussion of Method of Triads (MoT) validation of map structure..... 111
Part Two: Discussion of the analyses for validation of map clusters..... 112
Part Three: Discussion of integration of archival raw CBCL/2-3 data into the map of the CBCL toddler problem domain..... 113
Section One: Vector Analysis..... 113
Section Two: Candidates for independent forms of dimensional consistency across toddlerhood..... 114
Section Three: Comparison between dimensions and CBCL/2-3 subscales.. 118
Summary..... 120
Part Four: Discussion of MDS analysis of the Combined (CBCL/2-3 and CBCL/4-18) item set..... 121
Part Five: Discussion of integration of archival raw CBCL/4-18 data into the map of the Combined (CBCL/2-3 and CBCL/4-18) item set..... 125
Concluding Remarks..... 126
APPENDICES 130
REFERENCES..... 162

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A: Description of the CBCL/2-3 and CBCL/4-18 development and specifications..... 130

Appendix B: Items forming the CBCL/2-3 Aggressive Behavior Syndrome Scale and the CBCL/4-18 Aggressive Behavior Syndrome Scale.. 136

Appendix C: CBCL/2-3 item set..... 137

Appendix D: CBCL subset of 39 items for MoT..... 140

Appendix E: Combined item set numbering key..... 141

Appendix F: Instruction sheet for GOPA sorting and sheet for recording GOPA data..... 145

Appendix G: Method of Triads: Sorting instruction sheet and data recording sheet..... 147

Appendix H: Sheet for recording Method of Successive Sort (MOSS) data: criterion sort: e.g. aggressive..... 149

Appendix I: CBCL/2-3 H-tree..... 150

Appendix J: Mapgroups in the MDS map of the CBCL/2-3 item set and list of items not clustered..... 151

Appendix K: MoT results for CBCL/2-3 subset of 39 items..... 154

Appendix L: H-tree for the Combined item set..... 155

Appendix M: Mapgroups in the MDS solution for the Combined (CBCL/2-3 and CBCL/4-18) item set..... 158

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Child Behavior Checklist/2-3 (CBCL/2-3) multidimensional scaling solution (D=5) (spatial map) view of three-dimensional PLOT configuration (D1-D2 view): Items loading on subscales on the MDS map with subscale identifiers and item numbers.....	83
Figure 2	CBCL/2-3 MDS map view of three-dimensional PLOT configuration: D1-D2 view with clustered items linked showing abbreviated item descriptors.....	84
Figure 3	CBCL/2-3 MDS map view of three-dimensional PLOT configuration: D1-D2 view showing numbered and summarized clusters.....	85
Figure 4	CBCL/2-3 MDS map view of three-dimensional PLOT configuration: D1-D3 view showing numbered and summarized clusters.....	86
Figure 5	Parent criterion sorts overlaid on CBCL/2-3 MDS map.....	93
Figure 6	CBCL subscale clusters in the MDS map.....	96
Figure 7	Combined item set MDS map: D1-D2 view showing numbered and summarized clusters and individual item numbers.....	97
Figure 8	Combined item set MDS map D1-D3 view showing numbered and summarized clusters.....	98

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	Items loading on the CBCL/2-3 and CBCL/4-18 Aggressive Behavior scales.....	17
Table 2	Items that are scored in more than one scale on the CBCL/4-18..	49
Table 3	Dimension 1.....	87
Table 4	Dimension 2.....	88
Table 5	Dimension 3.....	88
Table 6	Dimension 4.....	89
Table 7	Dimension 5.....	89
Table 8	Criterion sorts: results, indicating common items.....	91
Table 9	Parent Criterion MOSS data: results of regression on MDS coordinates for each of the first 3 dimensions.....	92
Table 10	Student Criterion MOSS data for 'Aggression' and 'Disobedient': results of regression on MDS coordinates for each of the first 3 dimensions	93
Table 11	Canonical Correlation components of CBCL/2-3 vectors at 24- and 42-months.....	94
Table 12	Canonical Correlation components for the 6 narrow-band CBCL/2-3 subscales at 24- and 42-months.....	94
Table 13	Results of regression analyses relating CBCL subscale score to dimensions.....	95
Table 14	Combined item set MDS analysis results: Dimension 1.	99
Table 15	Combined item set MDS analysis results: Dimension 2.....	100
Table 16	Combined item set MDS analysis results: Dimension 2.....	101
Table 17	Labels for the five dimensions showing suggested CBCL/2-3 scale placement.....	120
Table 18	Comparison of dimensions for the Combined item set with those from the CBCL/2-3, revealed by MDS, with dimensions labelled, Achenbach's subscales (numbered and in brackets) for the purpose of discussion, and mapgroups in parentheses.....	124