Naughty or clumsy? Negative parental attributions in the context of child abuse risk

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Chapter 5

General Discussion

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In this dissertation precursors and consequences of negative parental attributions were studied as theorized by Milner's (1993, 2003) Social Information Processing (SIP) model of Child Physical Abuse (CPA), that was introduced and illustrated in Chapter 1. Specifically, it was tested if negative parental attributions function as a mediator between stressors and dysfunctional parenting. As presented in Chapter 2, in our first study it was found that mothers' negative parental attributions mediated the association between parenting stress and harsh and abusive discipline. No such relation was found for the other investigated stressors (i.e., low SES, partner-related stress), or for childhood maltreatment. In our second study, we replicated the finding that the relation between parenting stress and harsh and abusive discipline was mediated by negative parental attributions, for mothers as well as for fathers. In addition, for mothers we found that negative parental attributions also functioned as a mediator between the association of partner-related stress and abuse risk on the one hand, and harsh discipline and (low) observed supportive parenting on the other hand. Moreover, only parenting stress remained significant when parenting stress, partner-related stress, and abuse risk were studied in one model. This replication study with extension was outlined in Chapter 3. Last of all, the findings regarding situational stress as precursor of negative parental attributions were demonstrated in Chapter 4. In an experimental study design it was found that the effect of induced situational stress (cognitive load) on negative parental attributions was more pronounced for high-risk mothers, compared to low-risk mothers. Below, the overall findings of the dissertation will be discussed in terms of its fundamental theoretical implications; how do the results fit into the SIP-model, what were important limitations, and what can be advised regarding future research directions? In addition, implications for prevention and intervention purposes are discussed; what do the findings of this dissertation mean for programs that are designed to reduce (the consequences of) child maltreatment?

Theoretical Implications

The findings of the two studies that were presented in this dissertation contributed to more empirical knowledge about the SIP-model (Milner, 1993, 2003). As outlined in Chapter 1, a considerable number of studies confirmed the theorized attributional difference between high-risk/ maltreating parents and low-risk/ non-maltreating parents, since the introduction of the model 25 years ago (e.g., Burchinal, Skinner, & Reznick, 2010; De Paul, Asla, Perez-Albeniz, & De Cadiz, 2006; Slep & O'Leary, 1998). High-risk/ maltreating parents tend to attribute more responsibility and hostile intend to the child and evaluate (ambiguous) child behavior as more serious, wrong, and blameworthy. Nevertheless, some studies showed inconclusive findings regarding the proposed attributional differences (e.g., Dadds, Mullins, McAllister, & Atkinson, 2003; Montes, De Paul, & Milner, 2001). As a consequence, it was reasoned that there is need for

replication studies (Milner, 2003). In addition, it was advised that future research should study interaction effects of parental attributions with different parts of the model and that the interplay with stress would be explored further, all within study designs that use different groups of parents and that link parental attributions to observational measures of parenting. The studies presented in this dissertation were based on the above advised study directions in several ways, thereby contributing in deepening empirical evidence for the SIP-model.

Negative parental attributions and stress. Firstly, the interplay between different parts of the model was studied by testing the proposed mediational role of negative parental attributions between stress and dysfunctional parenting. We found proof for this mediational role in both of our studies. Results pointed in the direction of parenting stress to be the most influential type of stress that affects negative parental attributions, and consequently dysfunctional parenting. Only the relation between parenting stress and dysfunctional parenting was consistently found to be mediated by negative parental attributions (both studies, for self-reported and observed parenting, for mothers and fathers). Mediation was not found for SES and childhood maltreatment as predictors, and mediation for partner-related stress and child abuse risk disappeared when studied simultaneously in one model with parenting stress (Chapters 2 & 3).

These findings might indicate that stressors that are directly related to the child and/ or are more related to daily parenting situations in which parents attribute child behavior, might influence parental attributions most. As explained by the SIP-model, the more stress a parent experiences, the more the parent will engage in automatic processing; depend on pre-existing schemata and thinking patterns that are well-learned and are easily accessible (i.e., "children should not spill milk and must be held responsible for it") instead of taking situational information into account ("his little sister bumped into him, so he should not be held responsible for spilling milk"). In addition, it is explained that when automatic processing is caused by stress that is child/parenting related, it is likely that other negative emotions and cognitions (e.g., anger and hostility) will also be more at the surface when observing challenging child behavior, because this reminds parents of negative parenting experiences in the past (Milner, 1993, 2003). So, the combination of stress and negative affect as a consequence of parenting stress might cause an increased susceptibility to automatic processing, and subsequently bias in parental attributions. Several other empirical findings also supported this line of thought (Dopke & Milner, 2000; Schellenbach, Monroe, & Meluzzi, 1991).

Secondly, studying the interplay between parts of the model was extended by studying the causal relation between stress and negative parental attributions in an experimental design. Our first study and other previous research showed that stress is indeed related to more negative parental attributions (e.g., Berlin, Dodge, & Reznick, 2013; Clément &

Chamberland, 2009; Haskett, Scott, Willoughby, Ahern, & Nears, 2006), however causality claims were precluded because of the cross-sectional study designs. After contributing to the empirical evidence that heightened stress levels are indeed related to more negative parental attributions (Chapters 2 & 3), the relation between stress and negative parental attributions was further studied in an experimental design (Chapter 4). As theorized by the SIP-model, stress predicts negative parental attributions, but alternatively it could be the other way around: negative attributions could cause stress. To be more specific, when parents attributions are negatively biased, it is possible that they experience more stress because of this bias. It could be that parents with more negative parental attributions, are parents who generally experience things more negatively than other parents, and therefore experience more stress in their lives.

In an experimental design we found that induced situational stress alone was not sufficient to predict negative parental attributions. Moreover, we only found that for mothers the effect of induced situational stress, elicited by cognitive load (i.e., remembering groceries, having many things on your mind), enhanced the relation between existing stressors and negative attributions. No such interaction effect was found for white noise as induced stress. This might indicate that there is no causal relation between stress and negative parental attribution, and that the relation between high risk and negative parental attributions means that parents who attribute child behavior more negatively experience more stress. Nevertheless, we found that a combination of existing stress and situational stress did make a difference; the effect of induced situational stress (when elicited by cognitive load) was more pronounced for high-risk mothers, compared to low-risk mothers. This might imply that stress at least partially predicts negative attributions as theorized by the SIP-model (Milner, 1993, 2003). This implication should be interpreted with caution; the interaction effect was only found for one of the two types of induced stress (i.e. cognitive load) and only for mothers. Even though we should be careful drawing firm conclusions, we may speculate about possible explanations for this combined effect of induced and existing stress on negative attributions. Firstly, high-risk, compared to low-risk parents might be more physiologically responsive to stress and/ or they may have more biased pre-existing cognitions, as proposed by the SIP-model. Physiological responsiveness to stress makes parents more susceptible to automatic processing, and as consequence parents will rely less on situational information and more on pre-existing schemata. In addition, when these pre-existing schemata are biased as well, there might be a double risk in negatively affecting the parental attribution. Moreover, it could be reasoned that parental attributions are not easily taxed by stress. A serious amount of stress (existing and situational stress) might be needed to negatively influence the parental attribution, which can indicate that the system is quite robust. The latter argumentation was also proposed by Cassles and Milner (2000), who also did not find an effect for induced stress on negative parental attributions. Yet another explanation could be that automatic processing leads to different outcomes in high-risk compared to low-risk parents, because of differences in their pre-existing schemata. When stressed,

both high- and low-risk parents take situational information less into account and rely more on ingrained thought patterns, i.e. pre-existing schemata (general beliefs about children and parenting behavior), but in the case of high-risk parents these schemata might contain more biased information, leading to more negative attributions. Of course, a combination of the above given explanations might also be at work here. For now we can only cautiously conclude that negative parental attributions are (partially) caused by stress, and speculate about why high-risk parents were more affected by induced stress than low-risk parents. Future research can help to disentangle these speculations by experimentally studying the effect of stressors with different intensities on parental attributions, measuring physiological stress responses and pre-existing schemata, in both high- and low-risk samples.

Negative parental attributions and fathers. To address the encouragement of studying different groups of parents, we examined negative parental attributions for mothers as well as for fathers. As suggested, applying models found for mothers to fathers might be problematic, because they might be different in their parenting (mother: secure base, talk vs. father: play, exploration, discipline), in the amount of time they spend with their children (in general, mothers still spend more time with children), and in their biological make-up (different physiological reaction to stress) (Lamb, 2010; Kudielka & Kirschbaum, 2005). For example, when fathers are more the discipliners of the family, it might be plausible that fathers attribute challenging child behavior as more wrong and blameworthy and choose more often a disciplinary response, where mothers might attribute the behavior as more accidental and/or piteous, and comfort the child as a result of her family role of being the secure base. Or, when mothers spend more time with their children, their attributions might be based on more past child-related/ parenting information (for better or for worse), compared to fathers' attributions. Yet another explanation for expected attributional differences between mothers and fathers, is that they differ in physiological stress reaction, and hence they have different susceptibility to automatic processing. In a review on sex differences in stress responses by Kudielka & Kirschbaum (2005), it was reported that women subjectively experience more stress and show higher stress vulnerability than men. But, experienced stress seems not representative of physiological stress responses (i.e., increases in cortisol), and it has even been suggested that men are more physiologically reactive (i.e., increases in cortisol) to stress compared to women. Moreover, it has been speculated that the type of stress might influence differences in stress responses, with men more reactive to psychological stress (achievement challenges), and women more to psychosocial/ interpersonal stress (e.g., conflict, social rejection).

In Chapters 3 & 4, the results of mediation analyses and stress as precursor of negative parental attributions were outlined for both mothers and fathers and we tested

if the effects were different for mothers than for fathers. For both groups of parents we found that negative parental attributions mediated the relation between parenting stress and harsh and abusive parenting. For fathers we did not find indirect effects for other stressors (i.e., partner-related stress, abuse risk) or with observed supportive presence. Neither did we find an interaction effect of risk and induced stress on negative parental attributions, as found for mothers. Although at first glance our results indicate differences in negative parental attributions between mothers and fathers, after comparing effects no overall differences were found between fathers and mothers (Chapters 3 & 4). Several explanations can be given for these findings. First of all, it might imply that mothers and fathers are not different in their parental attributions and that they are not differently affected by stress regarding their negative parental attributions. Although theories suggest differences in parenting, biological makeup, and hours spent with their children, they simply might not cause differences in negative parental attributions. Or, they might only cause differences in samples with more serious amounts of risk and/or when parents experiences a more intense situational stressor. Moreover, the sample in both of our studies consisted of parents with medium to high SES. In these families it might nowadays be more common to equally divide parenting tasks between mothers and fathers, and as a consequence parenting roles and time spent with the child might not differ that much. Future studies can elaborate on studying possible differences between mother and father attributions by taking into account the amount of time parents spend with their children, studying the division of parenting roles, and using more intense situational stressors in both high- and low-risk samples. In addition, it can be interesting to study negative parental attributions in relation to child outcomes. Mother and father attributions might be similar in relation to parenting outcomes, but they might predict child outcomes differently. For example, in a study of Williamson and Johnston (2015) it was found that only father attributions, after controlling for mother attributions, was uniquely predictive of child behavior problems. We recommend future research to study mother and father attributions not only individually, but also in interaction with each other; how do they relate and interact within the family system and how do they (simultaneously, complementary?) influence their children?

Negative parental attributions and observational parenting measures. The advice to link parental attributions to observational measures of parenting was incorporated in Study 2. In Chapter 3 it was described that we used a don't touch task (e.g., Joosen, Mesman, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Van IJzendoorn, 2012; Van Berkel et al., 2015) to observe parenting behavior, following suggestions to use a stressful parenting task in order to minimize self-reporting bias and to discriminate maltreating parents from non-maltreating parents (Bennett, Sullivan, & Lewis, 2006). The scales harsh physical discipline, verbal overreactive discipline and supportive presence were coded. We could only use supportive presence for data-analyses, because within the other scales there

was hardly any variation in our sample. Consequently, low supportive presence was used as a dysfunctional parenting measure within the SIP-model; parents who score low on supportive presence are parents who fail to use positive strategies in helping the child obey (e.g., induction, empathy, distraction).

It was found that negative parental attributions function as a mediator between stressors and low supportive presence, as was found with self-reported harsh parenting (in both studies; Chapters 2 & 3). This result adds to the proof of stress and negative parental attributions being important predictors of dysfunctional parenting as suggested by the SIP-model (Milner, 1993, 2003). Not only are parents at risk for abuse expected to select more often a power-assertive parenting technique, they are also expected to lack the ability to implement a positive parenting technique, based on their shortcoming in parenting knowledge and their biased expectations concerning compliance (Milner 1993, 2003). In addition, this result might indicate that the SIP-model, originally applicable to power assertive discipline as a risk factor for child physical abuse, might also be valid in explaining other forms of dysfunctional parenting, and subsequently different types of child maltreatment (i.e., emotional abuse, neglect, sexual abuse). Cognitive behavioral models like the SIP-model have been used previously, although rarely, to explain child neglect and child sexual abuse (e.g., Azar, Miller, Stevenson, & Johnson, 2017; De Paul & Guibert, 2008; Howells, 1981). More studies are needed to further test the applicability of the SIP-model for different types of child abuse and neglect.

Negative parental attributions vs. positive parental attributions. Low supportive presence also resembles the inability to implement a positive parenting strategy. In line with these findings, it might be interesting to study (the absence of) positive parental attributions within the SIP-model. In this dissertation we measured solely negative parental attributions, as most of the SIP attributional literature. Do high risk/ abusing parents have less positive attributions, compared to low risk/ non-abusing parents, and how are they related to dysfunctional parenting techniques, and subsequently child maltreatment? According to the attribution theory, it has been hypothesized that parents in general tend to attribute positive outcomes more to internal stable characteristics of the child, and negative outcomes to external situational factors (Miller, 1995). This has been found to work in the opposite way for maltreating parents: mothers rated negative behavior more to internal and stable child characteristics, outside of their control, and positive behavior to external and instable child characteristics (e.g., Larrance & Twentyman, 1983; Bugental, Blue, Cruzcosa, 1989). Other studies found inconclusive evidence regarding this difference in giving credit for positive behavior between high-risk/ maltreating vs. low-risk/ non-maltreating parents (e.g., Bradley & Peters, 1991; Dadds et al., 2003; Miller & Azar, 1996). However, these findings concern internal/external attributions regarding positive child behavior. It addition, it would be interesting to explore if high

risk/ maltreating parents, in comparison to low risk/ non-maltreating parents, have fewer positive attributions regarding neutral and ambiguous child behavior. For example, can the effects of parents' negative attributions (e.g., "spilling milk is serious wrongdoing of my child") be compensated by parents' positive attributions (e.g., "my child looks so cute when he tries to hold his cup straight"), and how are (low) positive attributions related to (dysfunctional) parenting? Future research is encouraged to explore the role of positive attributions within the SIP-model.

Limitations and future research directions. The two studies that were presented in this dissertation have some limitations that need to be mentioned. First of all, in both studies families were recruited by using convenience sampling; families could enroll themselves via a webpage on the internet. Although we tried to include families with different socioeconomic backgrounds, for example by recruiting in different social areas and using Facebook advertisements, most of the families that enrolled had a relatively high SES, resulting in a low-risk sample in both of our studies. A consequence of this selection procedure was low variability in risk scores; most parents were in the lower bound of the different risk scores. This might explain the small effects, the absence of some mediational effects (i.e., SES, childhood maltreatment), and the trivial differences between mothers and fathers that were found. For example, no relation was found between SES and negative parental attributions, and between childhood maltreatment and negative parental attributions (Chapter 2). This might be explained by the fact that there is simply no socioeconomic stress in a high-SES sample, or at least not enough to cause automatic processing, and subsequently bias parental attributions. For experienced childhood maltreatment this might also apply; to have a negative effect on pre-existing schemata and subsequently on parental attributions, there might be a threshold – a certain amount/ severity of experienced maltreatment- that needs to have been reached. Moreover, in our second study (Chapter 3) we could not perform analyses with the observational scales harsh physical discipline and verbal overreactive discipline, because these behaviors were nearly absent in the video observations of our low-risk sample. Nevertheless, by studying parental attributions in two low-risk samples we already found consistent evidence for different parts of the SIP-model. By using high-risk samples in the future, results might even provide more convincing evidence for the SIP-model.

Moreover, we only selected parents who described themselves as having a Dutch cultural background, because it is reasonable to think that culture could influence parental attributions. Indeed, prior research demonstrated that there are differences in cultural values concerning appropriate child behavior and optimal parenting practices (e.g., Gershoff et al., 2010; Korbin, 2003; Ripoll-Nunez & Rohner, 2006). This is especially important given that the effect of (dysfunctional) parenting practices on children may depend on the perceived normativeness of the particular practice (e.g., Deater-Deckard &

Dodge, 1997; Gershoff et al., 2010). Taken the above in consideration, generalization claims should be made cautiously and only focus on Dutch high SES families, or families with a comparable background. We encourage future research in using more heterogeneous samples with regard to SES, risk status and cultural background to further explore the interplay of different stressors on negative parental attributions.

Last, our results regarding the mediational role of negative parental attributions (Chapters 2 & 3) were based on cross-sectional data, so we concluded in the particular chapters that causality claims could only be made on theoretical grounds.. The results of our experimental data (Chapter 4) shed more light on these suggested alternative models; we found some initial proof that stress may, at least partially, predict negative attributions as proposed by the SIP-model. Other experimental and longitudinal study designs can elaborate on this finding and shed more light on the additional suggested pathways of the SIP-model. For example, the pathway of attributions and dysfunctional parenting; negative parental attributions might also be a consequence of dysfunctional parenting, and hence child maltreatment (i.e., post-hoc justification; Milner, 2003).

Although the presented studies in this dissertation have certain limitations and future research is recommended on several areas, the results contributed in deepening empirical evidence regarding interactive elements of the SIP-model. We found proof for the proposed mediational role of negative parental attributions between stress and dysfunctional parenting (including an observational measure) in both studies (for mothers and fathers), and that particularly parenting stress is an influential type of stress that affects parental attributions (Chapter 2 & 3). Furthermore, this dissertation extends the empirical findings regarding the theorized causal relation between stress and parental attributions; it was demonstrated that the effect of experimentally induced stress (elicited by cognitive load, not white noise) on negative parental attributions was more pronounced for high-risk mothers, compared to low-risk mothers.

Implications for prevention and intervention purposes

After lining up theoretical implications, the next important question is how the findings of this dissertation can be used to design effective interventions aimed at reducing (the risk of child) maltreatment. In studying negative parental attributions, we looked into parental cognitions as possible precursors of dysfunctional parenting, and subsequently child maltreatment. We found that parental attributions (partially) mediated the relation between different stressors and dysfunctional parenting, and found initial suggestions that stress is a precursor of negative parental attributions, instead of the other way around. These results advocate that prevention and intervention programs should not solely focus on stressors, but also target negative parental attributions.

Firstly, it can be useful to measure parents' negative attributions as a risk indicator for dysfunctional parenting, and subsequently child maltreatment. When parents are inclined to attribute relatively high amounts of responsibility and hostile intent to challenging but normative child behavior, this may serve as a heightened risk for the use of dysfunctional parenting techniques. So, negative parental attributions may merit a place within methods that analyze risks for parenting problems, and subsequently child maltreatment. For example, in the Netherlands child and family professionals are trained to work with instruments that systematically screen for parenting situations that might compromise the child's wellbeing (e.g., Licht Instrument Risicotaxatie Kindveiligheid – Jeugdzorg;, Ten Berge, & Eijgenraam, 2009). Checklists are used to systematically guide professionals in their signaling for child maltreatment (e.g., Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, 2011; http://www.signalenkaart.nl). Signals/ risk factors for child maltreatment are listed in categories such as physical and emotional wellbeing of the child, behavior of the child, family structure, but also (psychological) behavior of the parent is a part of the list. Although there is awareness of parental cognitions as risk factors - for example high child-related expectations are named as a signal - negative parental attributions are not listed. Based on our results and prior research it is a good consideration to incorporate the parental attributions to the list. Our newly developed attribution task (i.e., the PACT) can be of assistance in screening for negative parental attributions.

Secondly, to prevent or change negative parental attributions it is important to assist parents in developing unbiased interpretations and evaluations of their child's behavior. Creating awareness by educating parents might be an important first step. In the Netherlands, local authorities are responsible for prevention programs regarding child maltreatment. A recent report of De Kinderombudsman proclaimed that policy regarding preventive measures has been intensified in the last few years (De Wilde, Kooijman, Van Boven, & Van der Kooij, 2017). Particularly, the training of professionals to signal and report parenting situations that might compromise the child's wellbeing and (suspicion of) child maltreatment was reinforced. However, the report also concluded that there was a substantive lack in policy on educating parents in positive parenting. Prevention programs that educate parents in positive parenting are advised to incorporate parental attributions; make parents aware of their own attribution biases and help parents to redress them. An example of an existing program that can be used, is Video-Feedback Intervention to Promote Positive parenting and Sensitive Discipline (VIPP-SD; Juffer, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Van IJzendoorn, 2008; Mesman et al., 2008). In family home visits parents are not only trained in observing their child and positively interacting with their child, they are also educated in child development, knowledge about positive parenting techniques and understanding a child's thoughts and feelings. Moreover, since we found initial proof that stress (partly) predicts negative parental attributions, it would be recommended to additionally focus on stress reduction and/or coping mechanism in such an intervention program to optimally target negative parental attributions. Special attention should then be placed on stress that is directly related to the child and or

parenting. The prior mentioned VIPP-SD program could indirectly be seen as a method that reduces parenting stress, since parents are trained do deal with challenging parenting situations/ child behavior in a positive way and it has been proven to be effective in reducing child problem behaviors (Juffer, Struis, Werner, Bakermans-Kranenbrug, 2017). In addition, mindfulness-based stress reduction programs are nowadays frequently used to help people cope with stress and scientifically they are also found to be promising (Khoury, Sharma, Rush, & Fournier, 2015; Pascoe, Thomson, Ski, 2017;) in their stress reducing effects.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in this dissertation two studies were presented that offer support for the Social Information Processing theory as proposed by Milner (1993, 2003). In both studies it was found that negative parental attributions function as a mediator between stressors and dysfunctional parenting strategies. Especially parenting stress seemed to be an important type of stress that affects negative parental attributions, and consequently dysfunctional parenting. Additionally, in the second study we found some initial proof that stress predicts (partially) negative attributions, instead of the other way around. We did not find proof for attributional differences between mothers and fathers, nor that their attributions were differently affected by stress. Our findings contribute to the knowledge about the etiology of child maltreatment; the way parents interpret and evaluate child behavior (i.e., parental attributions) is of importance in predicting subsequent parenting behavior, and stress is (partially) responsible for attributional differences between parents. This knowledge can be used to design effective interventions aimed at reducing (the risk of) child maltreatment. For example, it has been discussed to incorporate negative parental attributions within screening instruments that trace initial parenting problems and subsequently child maltreatment, and that parenting programs should target negative parental attributions by making them aware of their attributional biases and assist them in neutralizing these biases, accompanied by tools for stress reduction.

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