

Effects of Parental Depression on Child Development: Marital Quality and Parenting Behaviour as Mediators?

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Introduction

Negative effects of parental depression on child development are well documented. How this association is mediated remains an open question. In their integrative model on intergenerational transmission of depression and psychopathology Goodman and Gotlib (1999; Connell & Goodman 2002) assume different moderating factors (e.g., availability and psychological functioning of the second parent) as well as mediating processes (e.g., negative cognitions, affects, and behaviours of the depressed parent). Based on these assumptions we focused on partnership quality and quality of parenting behaviour as two mediator variables.

Hypotheses

Given the importance of the early years for development and achievement the NUBBEK study addresses five comprehensive questions:

1. Maternal and paternal depressiveness are positively associated with child problem behaviour.
2. This association is partly mediated through partnership quality (commonness / communication and conflict behaviour) on an interpersonal and an intrapersonal level.
3. This association is partly mediated through parenting behaviour (positive and negative) on an interpersonal and an intrapersonal level.

Methodology

These hypotheses were tested on a sample of 355 families with four-years-old children (without migrational background) who were recruited within the National Study on Education, Care and Child-rearing during Early Childhood („Nationale Untersuchung zur Bildung, Betreuung, Erziehung in der frühen Kindheit“, NUBBEK). In mothers and fathers depressiveness was assessed with the ADS-K (Allgemeine Depressions Skala – Kurzversion; Hautzinger & Bailer, 1993), marital quality with the two scales commonness / communication and conflict behaviour of the PFB (Partnerschaftsfragebogen; Hahlweg, 1996) and parental behaviour with the APQ-PR (Alabama Parenting Questionnaire – Preschool Revision; Clerkin, Marks, Polkicaro & Halperin, 2007). Estimates of the mother and of the caregiver on the CBCL/1½-5 (Child Behaviour Checklist; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000) respectively the C-TRF (Caregiver-Teacher-Report-Form; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000) were used to measure child problem behaviour.

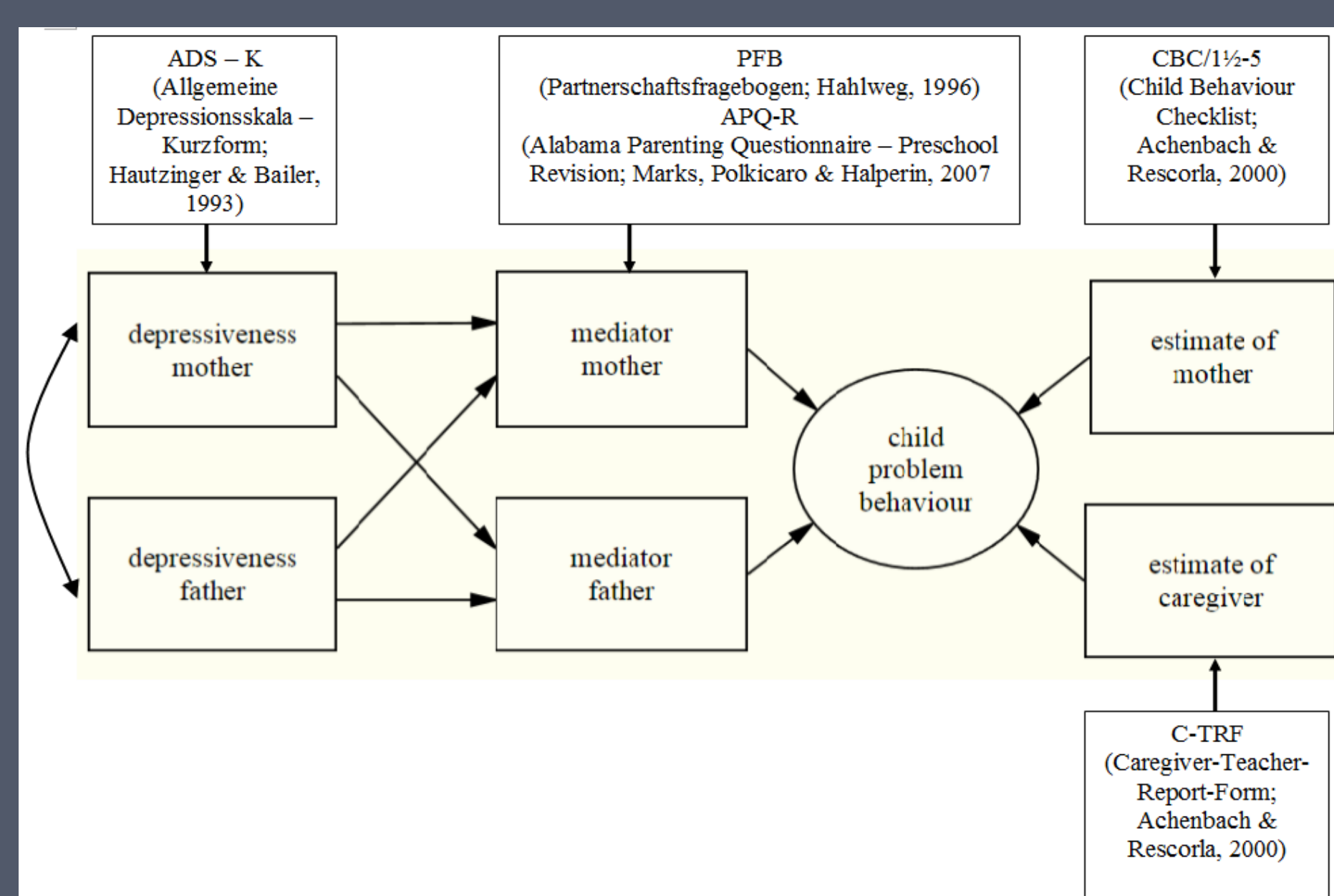


Fig. 1: Actor-Partner Interdependence Model

The mothers' average age was 35.46 years (18 – 49), the fathers' age was 38.61 (22 – 70). Childrens' age ranged from 4;0 to 4;11 with an average of 4;5 years.

Hypotheses were tested with structural equation modeling considering the nonindependence of the data (Actor-Partner-Interdependence-Model, APIM; Kenny, Kashy & Cook 2006). Parameters were estimated with the Maximum-Likelihood-Method corrected by Bollen-Stine-Bootstraps of 1000 samples. For validation, resulting non-significant models with a CFI \geq .95, a RMSEA \leq .06 and a SRMR \leq .11 were considered good.

Results

Results of our analysis suggested that only maternal, but not paternal depressive symptomatology was linked to child behaviour problems. None of the postulated mediators accounted for this link as the direct path between maternal depressiveness and child behaviour hardly reduced when any of the postulated mediators was considered. Though, there seems to be the tendency of a mediating effect through the negative constructs of maternal conflict behaviour in partnership and maternal negative parenting.

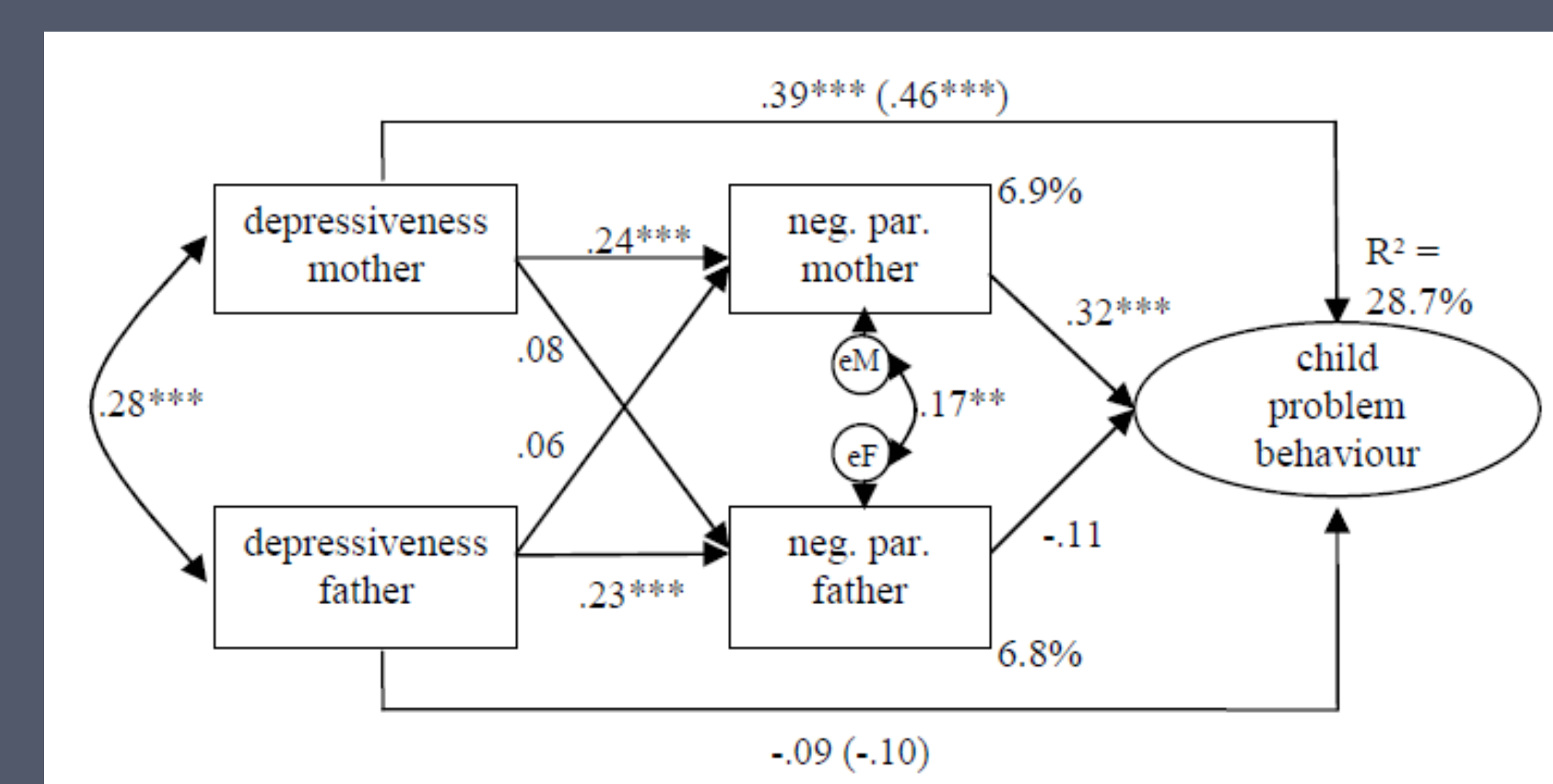
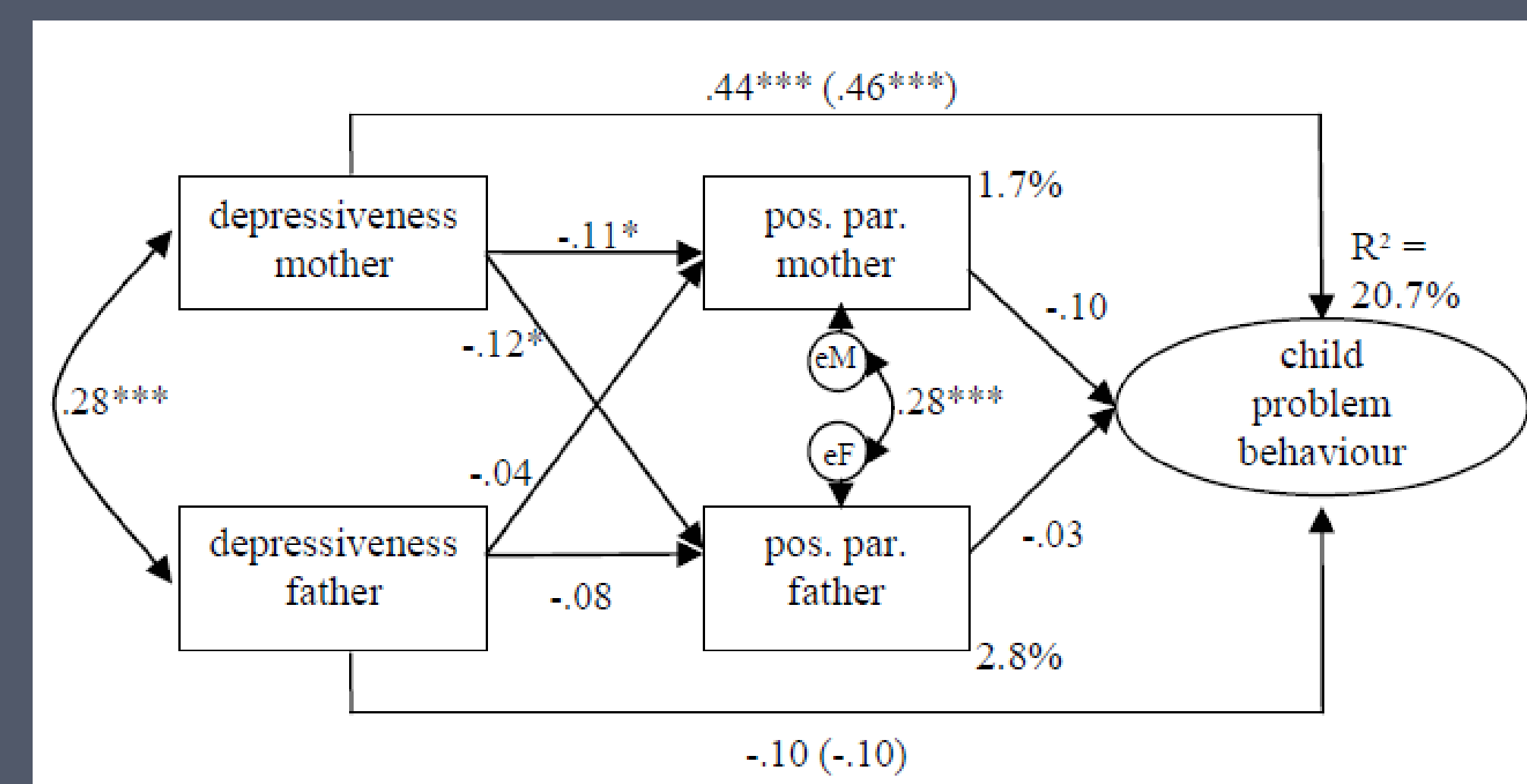
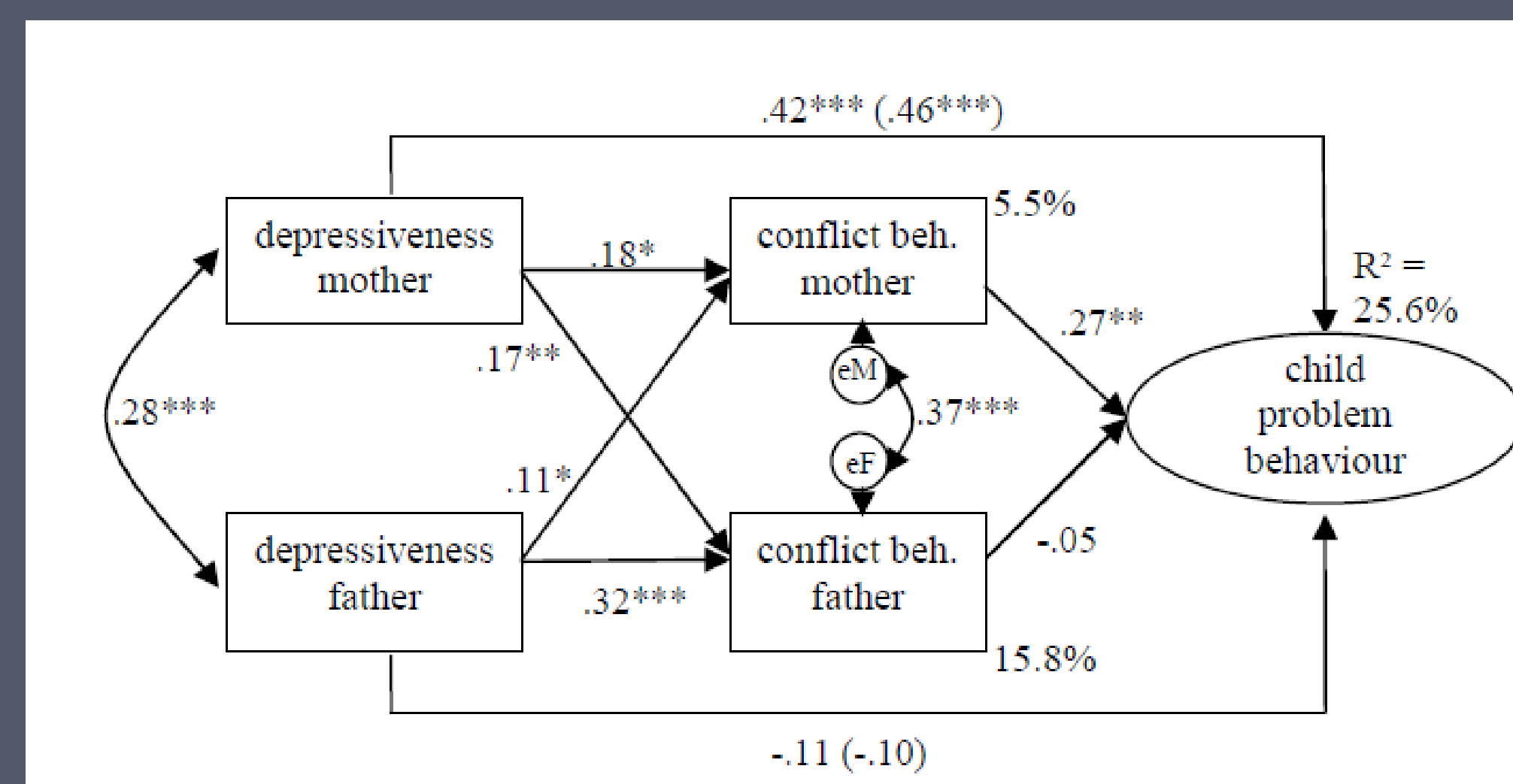
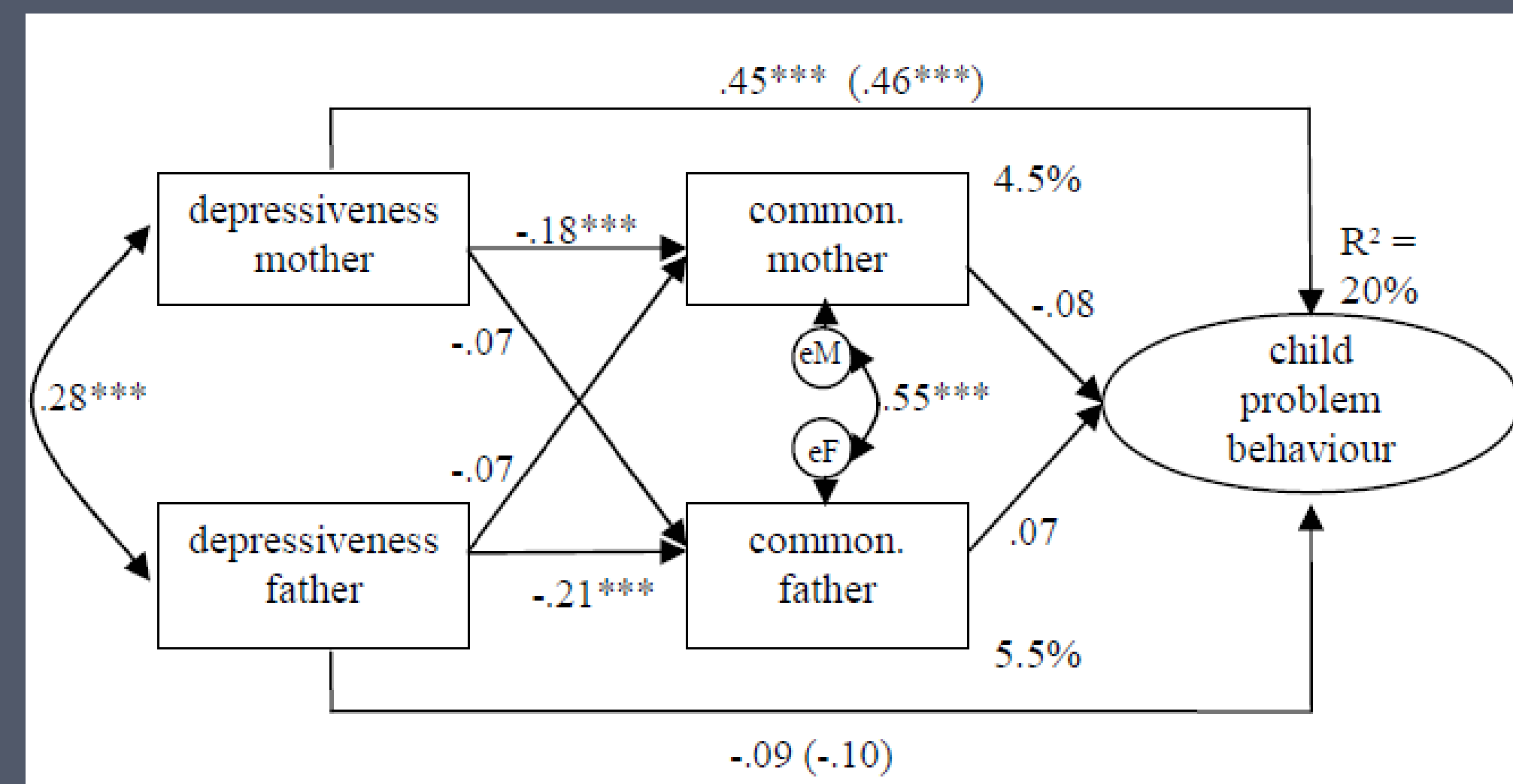


Fig. 2: Results

Discussion

Evidence of the structural equation models shows that only maternal depression is associated with problem behavior of the child. None of the family factors mediated this association. This result suggests that maternal depression has a direct effect on children although the fact that the mothers' estimates of child behaviour problems were included could have biased this effect. Moreover, data shows that high levels of marital conflict – as estimated by the mother – as well as negative maternal parenting play an important and independent role in predicting child outcome. To clarify the role of paternal depression future studies should include estimates of the father about child adjustment problems. Although these correlational data do not qualify for causal inferences these hypotheses can be tested using follow-up measurements.

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