

Parents' views of child personality, child's perceived competence,
family structure and function: Relationships and implications

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Abstract

This paper presents empirical data on the relationship between child personality, as viewed by parents, and a set of psychological, contextual (family), and demographic factors. The sample consists of 276 families living in different parts of Greece. Parents rated their child's personality using a new questionnaire, the Inventory of Child Individual Differences (ICID; Halverson, et al., in press). The following were used as predictor variables: mothers' and fathers' involvement in child care, three factors of family adaptability and cohesion, six domains of child's perceived competence, gender of child, and density of residence. Standard multiple regression analyses showed that a considerable amount of variance (ranging from 16% to 59%) of child personality components can be explained by their linear relationship with the independent variables used. Both personality and non-personality variables contributed significantly in the prediction of child personality, their effect varying for the five components. Results are discussed in the light of literature from related fields, such as developmental psychology, social psychology and cross-cultural psychology. It is suggested that the combined use of multiple sources of information (fathers, mothers, children), and different levels of measurement (person-oriented and contextual variables) constitutes a fruitful approach for the empirical study of child personality.

Key-words

Parents' views of child personality, perceived competence, family cohesion and adaptability, child care

Introduction

It is argued that personality psychology is as active today as at any point of its history (Funder, 2000). However, a number of theoretical and methodological considerations arouse for researchers who wish to study the subfield of child personality. To begin with, there is a lack of consensus regarding the main dimensions of child personality as well as their relations with temperament and the adult personality. This poses a limitation concerning the definition and selection of dependent variables while, at the same time, one has to deal with a large number of traits and a variety of overlapping diagnostic methods.

In the adult literature there is a growing consensus that personality traits can be adequately summarized by five broad dimensions: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience/culture. The well-known Five Factor Model, or the Big Five, has been characterized as the “latitude and longitude” along which any personality construct should be mapped (Ozer, & Reise, 1994). Furthermore, developmental antecedents of the Big Five have been traced in parents’ free descriptions of child personality characteristics (Kohnstamm, Halverson, Mervielde, & Havill, 1998), thus enhancing the comprehensiveness of the model.

A second consideration has to do with the empirical study of the relationships between personality, situation and behaviour. Although the person-situation debate seems to be more or less outdated, there is not enough data linking personality with contextual variables. For example, cross-cultural research has shown that family constitutes an important framework during the course of development (Kağıtçibaşı, 1996). Yet, the implications of family structure and function on the development of child personality have not yielded much attention, perhaps due to the complexity and dynamic nature of family, as opposed to the expected stability of personality dispositions.

The source of information is another important issue when it comes to the assessment of child personality. Data are usually collected from significant adults, i.e. parents and/or teachers, by peers or by the children themselves. However, the validity and reliability of self-reports provided by individuals is rather limited. Hofstee (1994) pointed out that the averaged judgement of knowledgeable informants provides an effective method for assessing someone's personality. It is reasonable to assume that the same would apply for child personality ratings, in particular, due to the child's inadequate cognitive and psychosocial development.

The nature, sources, and consequences of parents' ideas concerning child development are extensively discussed by Goodnow and Collins (1990). The authors stress the importance of a number of factors influencing parents' views of their children that go beyond the children's overt behaviour. These factors include, among others, the kind and extent of information regarding the child, that is exposed to parents, the degree to which father and mother share household work and childcare responsibilities, and parental psychological properties: goals, expectations, values, beliefs, needs, interests, attitudes concerning children, childhood and parenting.

The present study

Our study aims at exploring possible relations between parents' views of child personality, on the one hand, and family cohesion and adaptability, child perceived competence and demographic variables, on the other. Multiple sources of information (fathers, mothers, children), and different levels of measurement (person-oriented and contextual variables) are used in an attempt to address the considerations raised above. From this point of view, our study can be placed in a hybrid field that -hopefully!- integrates personality and social psychology (Funder, 2000).

Method

Participants

The sample consists of 276 families (father, mother, and child). Of them, 113 (40%) live in Athens, capital city of Greece, 85 (31%) live in a town (5,000-100,000 inhabitants), and 78 (29%) families live in rural areas or on an island. Education of parents is distributed across four levels: primary (fathers: 27%; mothers: 23%), secondary (fathers: 25%; mothers: 40%), professional (fathers: 24%; mothers: 16%), and university (fathers: 24%; mothers: 21%). As far as gender of child is concerned, 135 (49%) boys and 141 (51%) girls participated in the study. Their age ranges between 7-13 years ($M=10.3$ yrs; $s=1.2$ yrs) and they are all pupils of the last four grades of primary school.

Measures and Procedure

Both parents rated their child's personality using the Inventory of Child Individual Differences (ICID; Halverson, Havill, Deal, Besevegis, & Pavlopoulos, in press). Five components of child personality, as viewed by parents, were extracted: conscientiousness (16 items, $\alpha=.90$), neuroticism (23 items, $\alpha=.93$), agreeableness (21 items, $\alpha=.91$), extraversion (29 items, $\alpha=.92$), and intellect (15 items, $\alpha=.90$). The mean rating of father and mother for each child was used in subsequent analyses.

Parents also completed the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale (FACES-II; Olson, Portner, & Bell, 1991). Principal components analysis suggested the existence of three factors, which best summarized our data: emotional closeness (10 items, $\alpha=.82$), emotional distance (6 items, $\alpha=.72$), and hierarchical role taking (5 items, $\alpha=.65$). The mean of the two parents for each child was used in further analyses.

A scale measuring parental involvement in child care was developed for the specific purposes of the study. It consists of 6 items ($\alpha=.70$). Separate scores were produced for mothers and fathers.

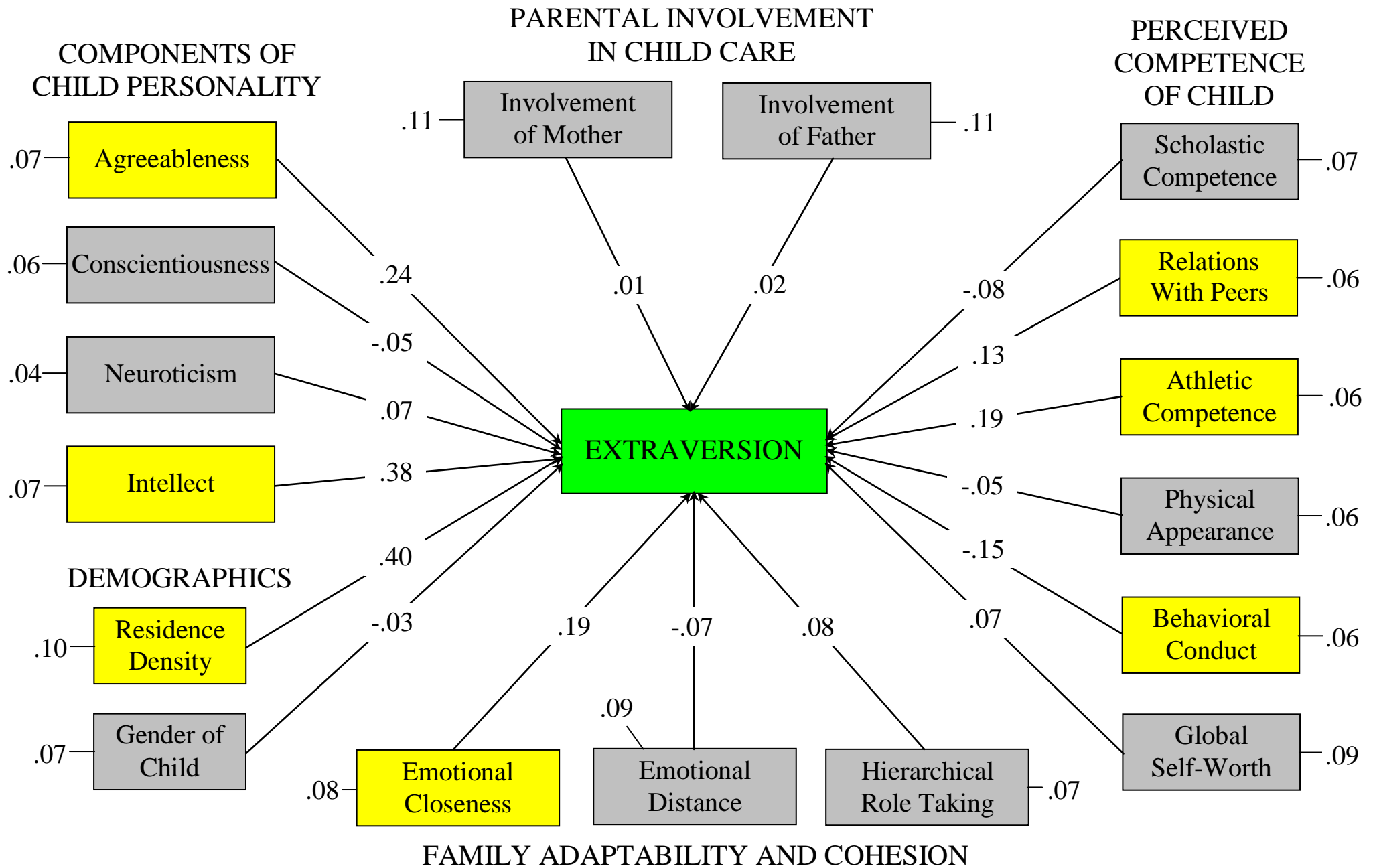
Children were administered the Perceived Competence Scale for Children (PCSC; Harter, 1982). Six domains of competence were assessed, each consisting of 6 items: scholastic competence ($\alpha=.76$), relations with peers ($\alpha=.74$), athletic competence ($\alpha=.77$), physical appearance ($\alpha=.83$), behavioural conduct ($\alpha=.76$), and global self-worth ($\alpha=.77$).

Finally, demographic data were collected (see *Participants* section), plus an indicator of residence density (number of persons living in the same house divided by the number of rooms).

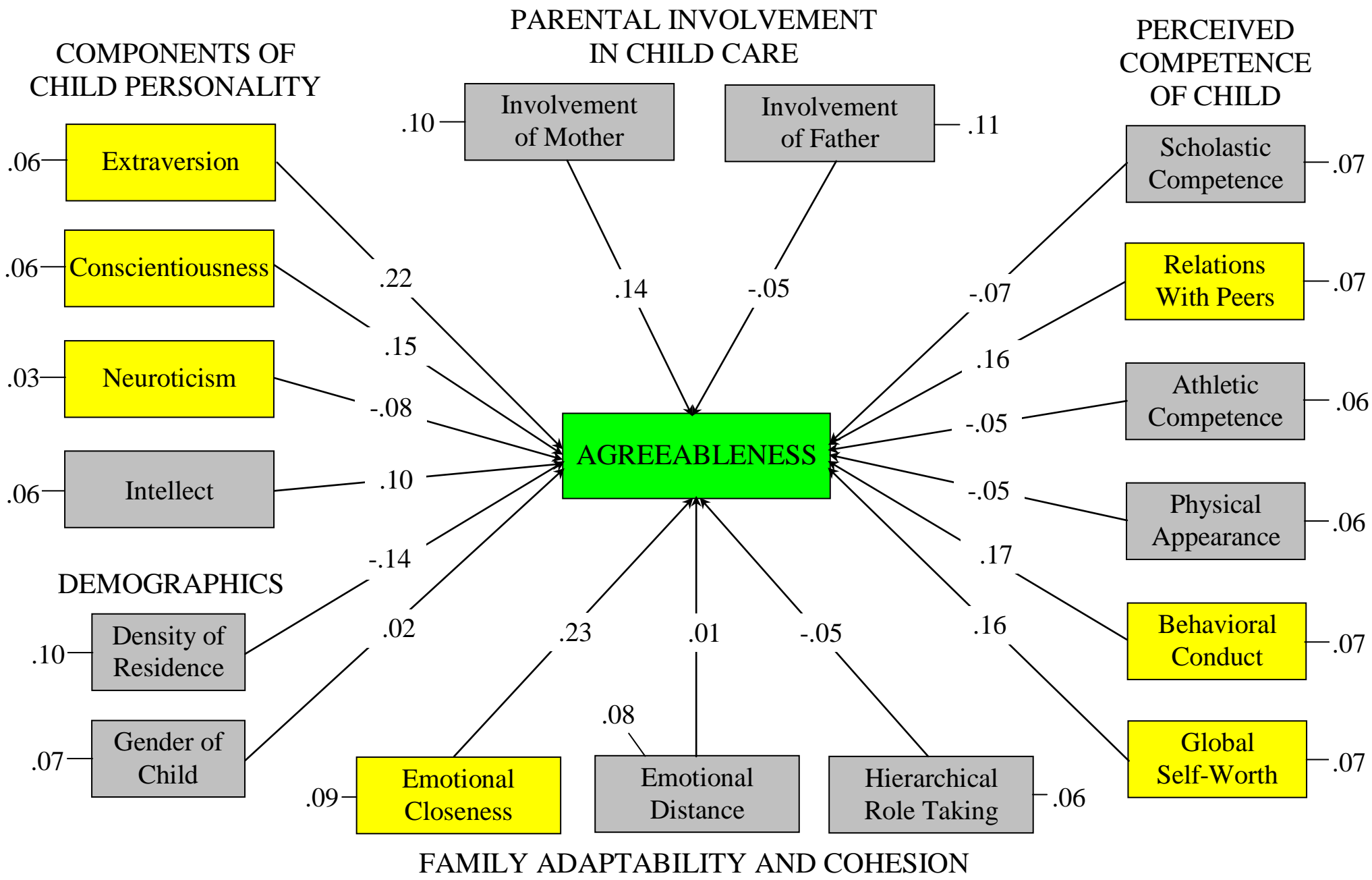
Results

A series of standard multiple regression analyses were performed using each of the five components of child personality as dependent variable and a set of independent variables, which included: (a) the rest four components of child personality; (b) the three factors of the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale; (c) father's and mother's degree of involvement in child care; (d) the six dimensions of the Perceived Competence Scale for Children; and (e) two demographic variables: density of residence and gender of child.

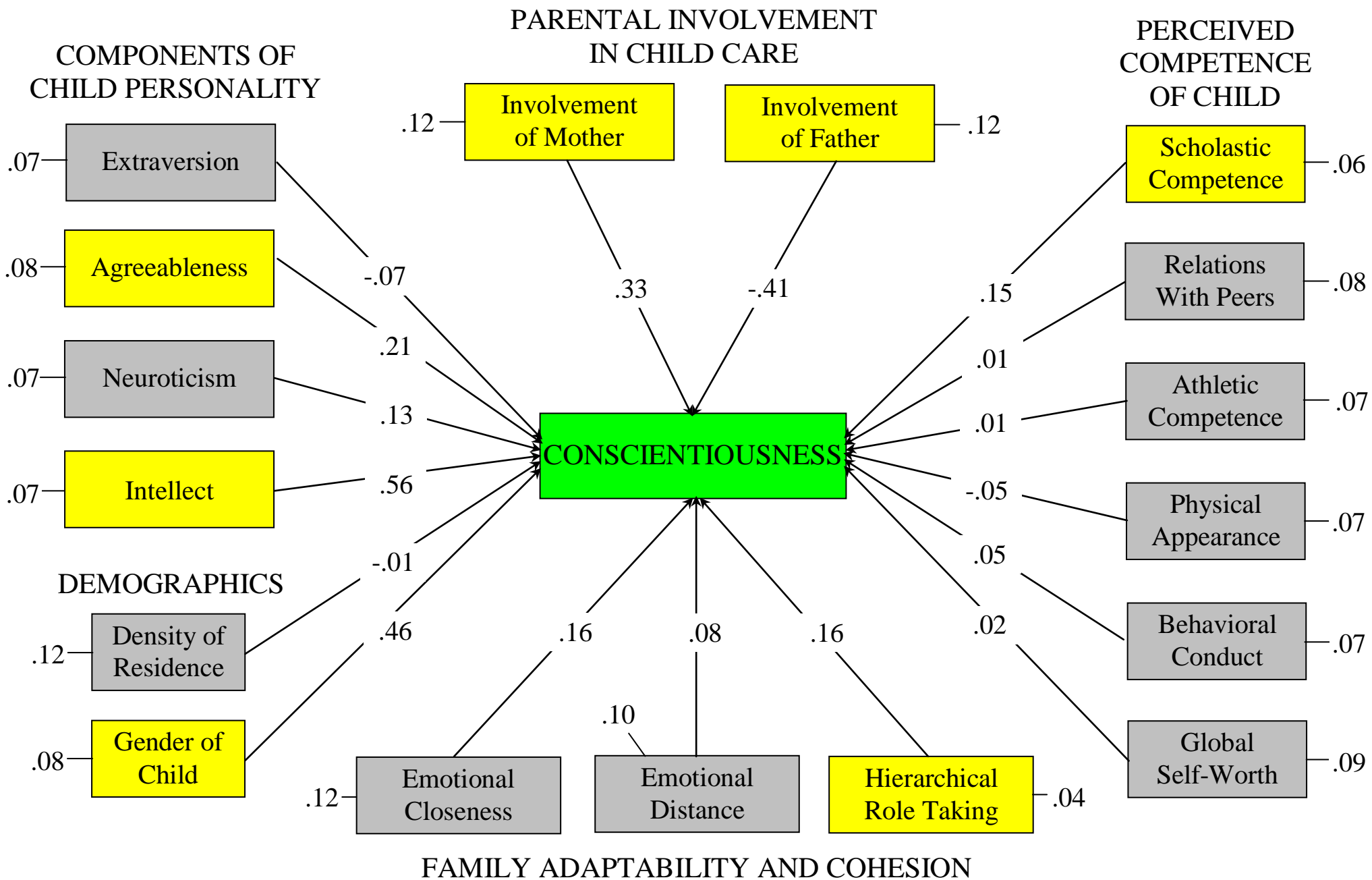
The results of these analyses are presented below. In the following figures, the dependent variable is marked green. Yellow boxes stand for independent variables that contribute significantly to the prediction of the dependent variable. Grey boxes refer to independent variables with a non-significant effect on the dependent variable. Numbers on the arrows are the unstandardized regression coefficients (B 's). Numbers on the side of the boxes indicate the standard error of B . Coefficients summarizing the regression model (multiple R , R^2 and adjusted R^2) are given at the bottom.



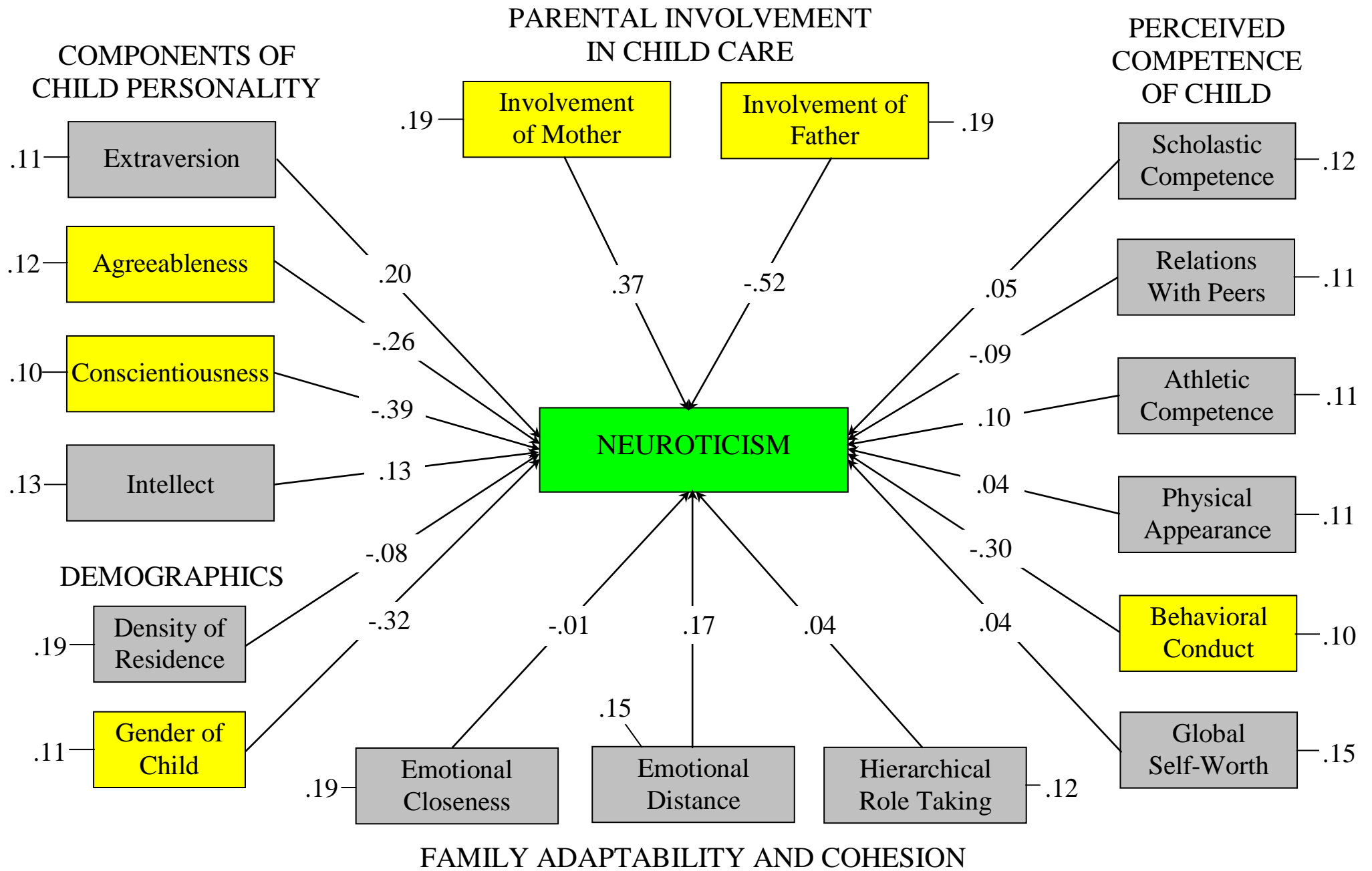
Regression coefficients: Multiple $R=.67$, $R^2=.45$, Adjusted $R^2=.40$



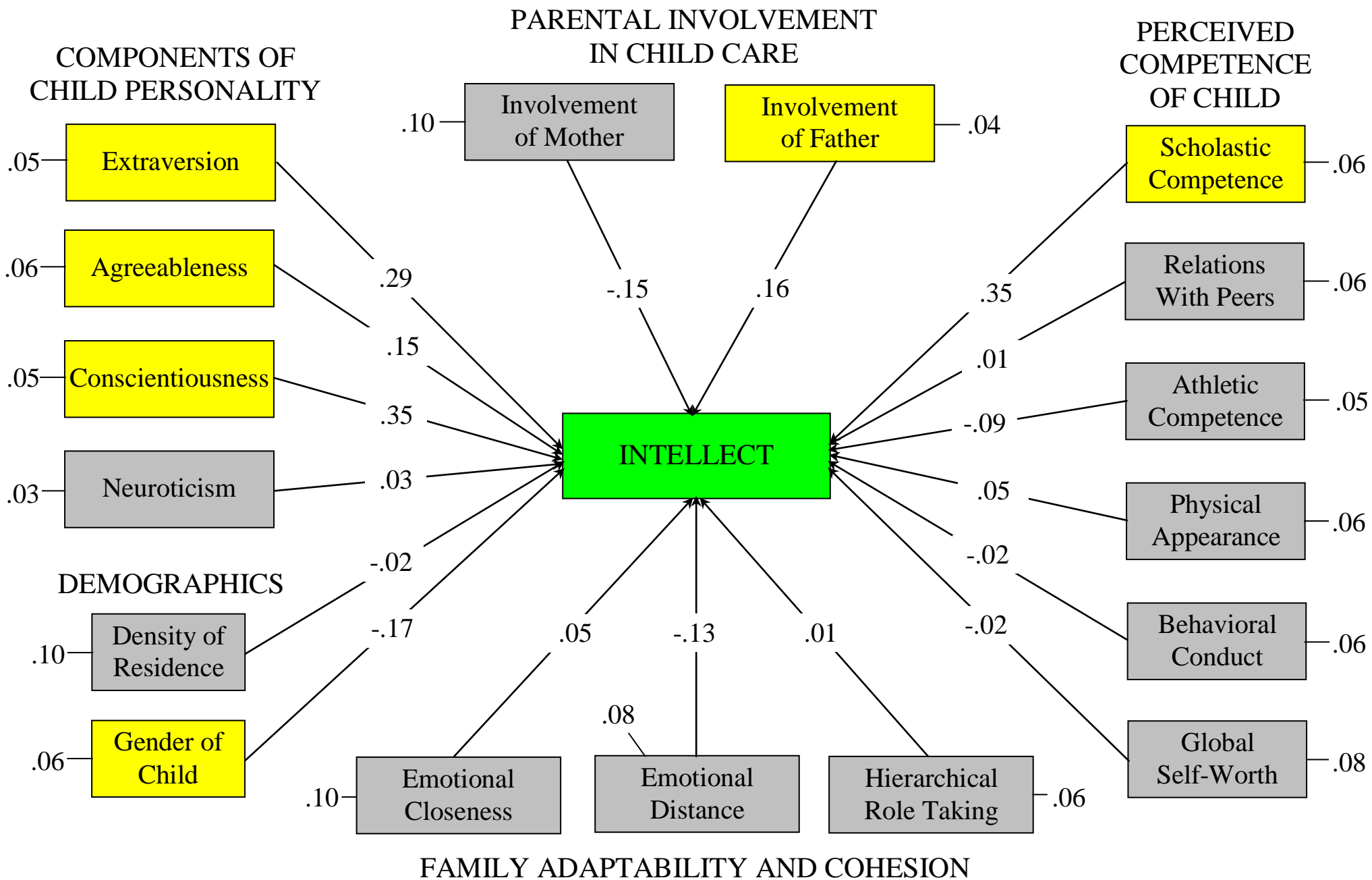
Regression coefficients: Multiple $R=.65$, $R^2=.42$, Adjusted $R^2=.38$



Regression coefficients: Multiple $R=.76$, $R^2=.58$, Adjusted $R^2=.55$



Regression coefficients: Multiple $R=.48$, $R^2=.23$, Adjusted $R^2=.16$



Regression coefficients: Multiple $R=.79$, $R^2=.62$, Adjusted $R^2=.59$

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that a considerable amount of variance (ranging from 16% to 59%) of child personality components, as viewed by parents, can be explained by their linear relationship with a combination of other personality components as well as with psychological, family and demographic variables. This is not to suggest that causal inferences will be made since the direction of effects cannot be defined due to methodological and theoretical limitations. Moreover, this does not refer to the person-situation debate, which can be declared about 98% over, according to Funder (2000). Our data provide evidence that parents' perceptions of child personality are linked to family structure and function, to the perceived competence of child, and to child's gender.

As far as family function is concerned, emotional closeness between family members is positively related with interpersonal qualities of child personality, i.e. extraversion and agreeableness. In addition, hierarchical role taking contributes to higher score on conscientiousness. Characteristics such as close bonds, interdependence, and mutual obligations are adaptive within the traditional value system of the extended Greek family (Georgas, 1991). Therefore, it is not surprising that they are rated, if not encouraged, by parents as desirable behaviours of their children.

The degree of involvement of father and mother in child care is connected with aspects of child personality having to do with manageability, however, with a contradictory effect resulting from the part of the two parents. Involvement of father predicts low level of conscientiousness and neuroticism while the opposite is true for mothers: the higher the involvement of mother, the higher the scores of conscientiousness and neuroticism. It could be that fathers' role in child care is different from mothers' role not only in quantity but also in content (Russell, 1983), thus leading to differentiated outcomes.

When significant relationships are found between parents' and children's perceptions, they generally tend to agree with each other. For example, high parental evaluations on extraversion and agreeableness coincide with positive perceived competence of child in the domain of relation with peers. A child with a more positive perceived behavioural conduct is viewed by parents as more agreeable and less emotionally reactive. High perceived scholastic competence of child is also related to high intellect score, as rated by parents. It is not clear if these are self-fulfilling prophecies of parents or if their judgments are based on perceptual cues (Funder, & Sneed, 1993) emitted by children.

Results on the relation between gender and the assessment of child personality are in accordance with gender stereotypes, e.g., boys tend to be more reactive while girls are expected to be more diligent. These findings may reflect the differential socialization practices adopted by parents, since it is observed that gender-related differences increase with age (Block, 1983). On the other hand, gender differences become less apparent in modern societies, in comparison with traditional ones (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1992). This may explain why some well-known beliefs concerning the two sexes were not found in our study, e.g., gender was not significantly related with extraversion or agreeableness.

A comprehensive study of personality includes three elements: the person, the situation, and behaviour (Funder, 2000). For the purposes of our study we collected data from different sources (parents, children), measured both person-oriented and contextual (family) variables, and reviewed literature from related fields, such as social psychology and developmental psychology. We believe this to be a promising approach in order to better understand parents' views of child personality.

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