



Emotionally and Cognitively Drained: Within- and Between-Person Associations Between Cognitive Emotion Regulation and Parental Burnout

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1 Introduction

Emotion regulation has recently been suggested to predict parental burnout, a prevalent syndrome in parenting. However, a substantial theory-method gap exists, as most studies have relied on cross-sectional data and between-person analyses. In this study, we aimed to illuminate the longitudinal associations between two powerful cognitive emotion regulation strategies—cognitive reappraisal and rumination—and parental burnout from both between- and within-person perspectives. In this study, we addressed three research questions: (1) How are parental burnout and the use of cognitive emotion regulation strategies associated at the between-person level? (2) How are parental burnout and the use of cognitive emotion regulation strategies associated at the within-person level? (3) If reciprocal relationships between parental burnout and emotion regulation exist, which variable is causally dominant?

2 Methods

To fulfil our objectives, we conducted a 9-month three-wave panel study (September 2023 – May 2024) in a sample of 1,373 U.S. parents. The between- and within-person research questions were analyzed with latent cross-lagged panel models (CLPMs; Figure 1) and random intercept cross-lagged panel models (RI-CLPMs; Figure 2), respectively.

3 Results

CLPM results: $\chi^2(835) = 1955.78, p < .001; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .03 [.030, .034]; SRMR = .043$. All autoregressive paths were statistically significant. The relationship between rumination and burnout was positive and reciprocal over time. The z test for the directional predominance of cross-lagged path coefficients between rumination and burnout was not significant. The cross-lagged paths from reappraisal to burnout were significant and negative, but not vice versa.

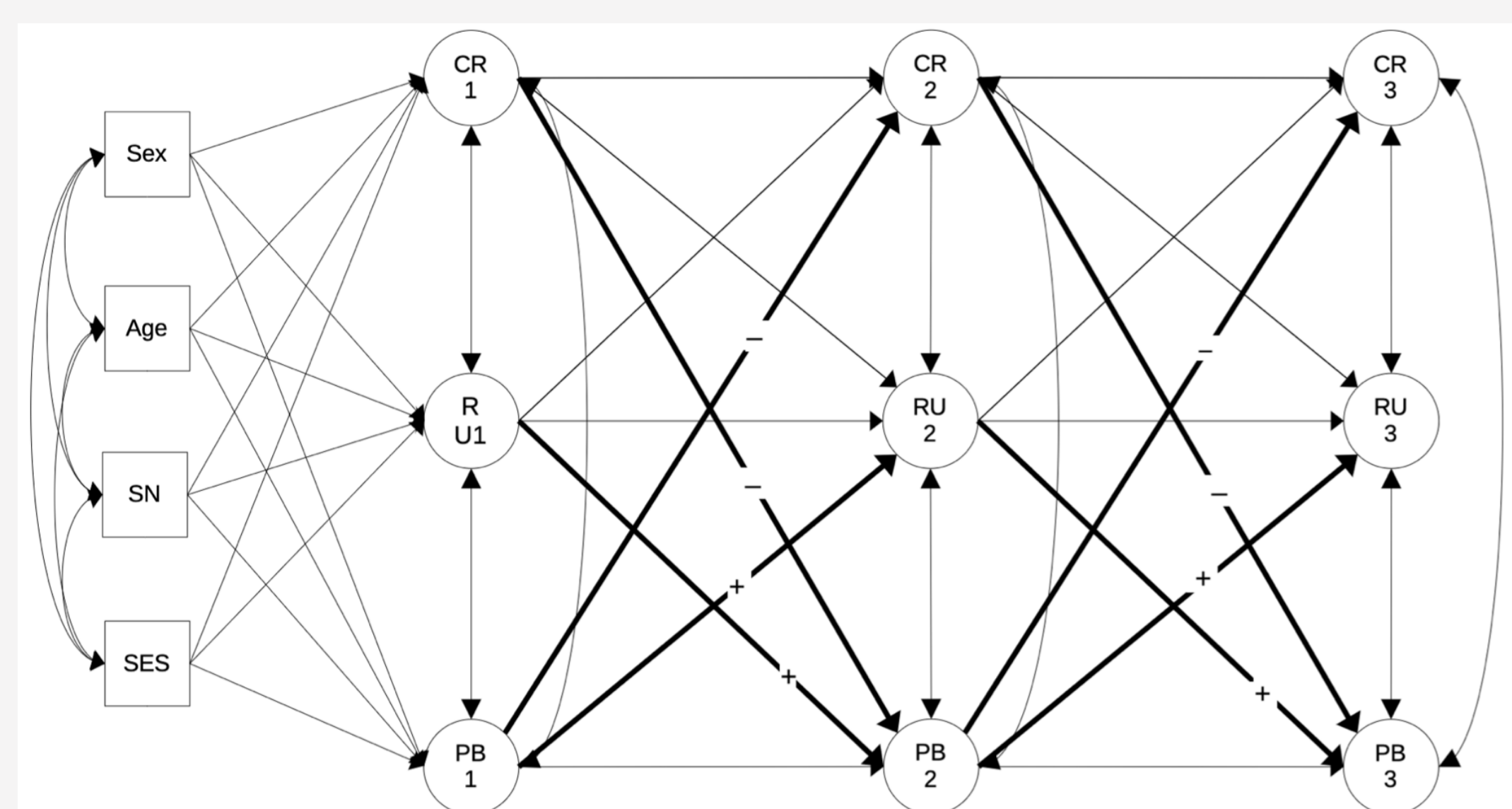


Figure 1: Latent cross-lagged panel model for cognitive reappraisal (CR), rumination (RU), and parental burnout (PB). SN = special needs; SES = socioeconomic status. Manifest indicators of both emotion regulation strategies and parental burnout are not depicted.

RI-CLPM results: $\chi^2(823) = 1790.6, p < .001; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .03 [.03, .03]; SRMR = .04$. The stable traits of burnout and reappraisal were negatively correlated, whereas those of burnout and rumination were positively correlated. After controlling for these stable traits, all autoregressions for burnout and rumination were significant. None of the autoregressions for reappraisal were significant. Significant negative cross-lagged effects from burnout to both emotion regulation strategies were found, whereas the reverse cross-lagged effects were not statistically significant.

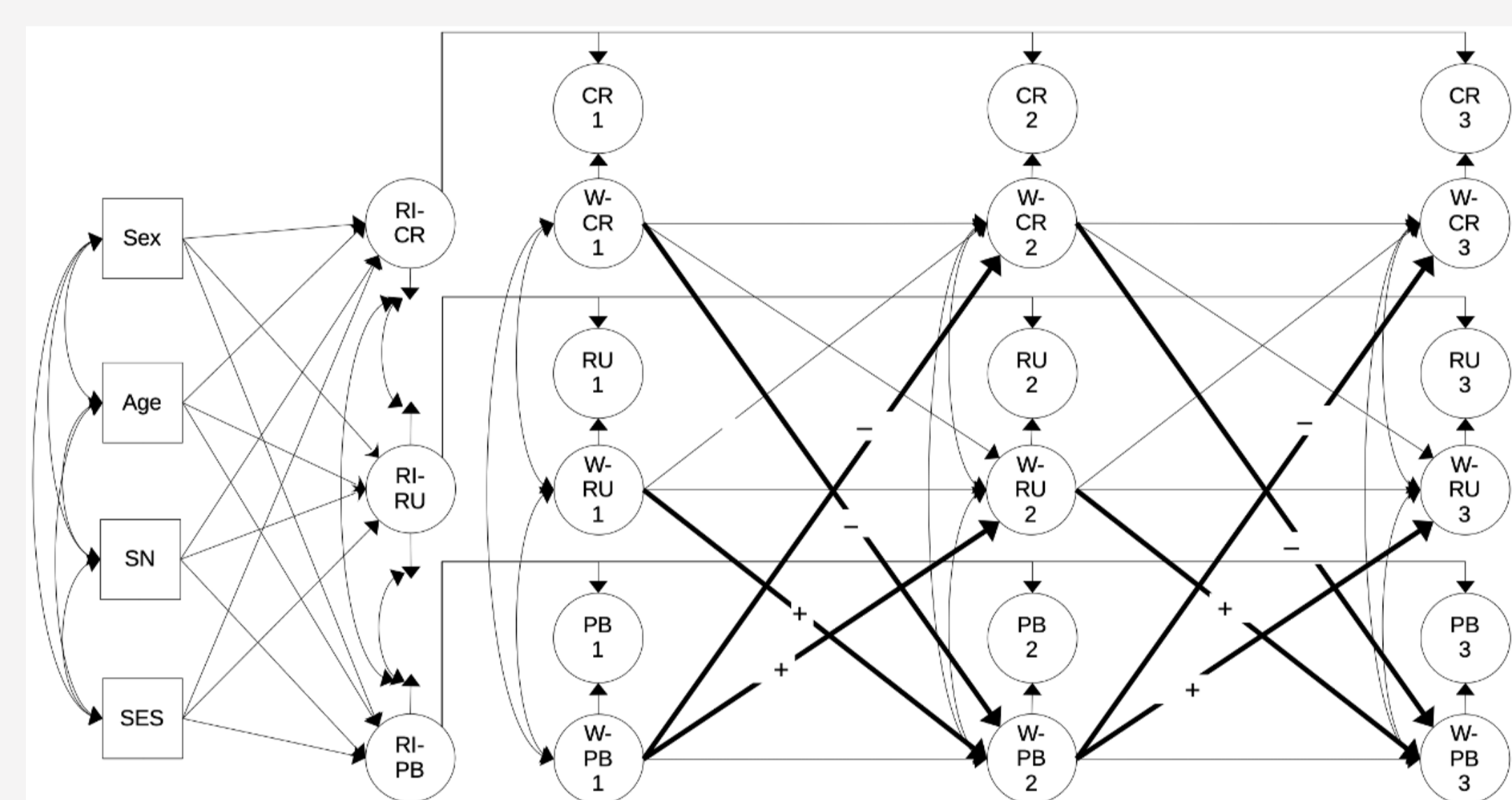


Figure 2: Latent random intercept cross-lagged panel model for cognitive reappraisal, rumination, and parental burnout. RI-CR, RI-RU, RI-PB = random intercepts for cognitive reappraisal, rumination, and parental burnout, respectively. W-CR = within-person cognitive reappraisal factors; W-RU = within-person rumination factors; W-PB = within-person parental burnout factors. SN = special needs; SES = socioeconomic status. Manifest indicators of both emotion regulation strategies and parental burnout are not depicted.

4 Discussion

Our between-person analysis revealed a reciprocal relationship between rumination and parental burnout. Parents who engaged in brooding rumination more frequently than other parents at one time point also reported more burnout symptoms than other parents at a later time point, and vice versa. Conversely, parents who ruminate more frequently than others are more vulnerable to burnout, which in turn intensifies rumination, potentially creating a cycle of increasing distress. These results highlight the differential roles of adaptive emotion regulation strategies and maladaptive ones in the development and maintenance of parental burnout. The within-person analysis further showed that temporal changes in a parent's level of burnout predicted subsequent changes in their use of both emotion regulation strategies, but not vice versa. It can be said that parental burnout symptoms limit parents' capacity to engage in cognitive emotion regulation.

5 Conclusions

These findings suggest that the current theoretical assumption about the role of emotion regulation in parental burnout may need to be reconsidered. Furthermore, parents may benefit from parenting programs that integrate various emotion regulation strategies and their practical applications.

