Effect of Maternal Borderline Personality Disorder on Autonomy and Relatedness in the Mother-Adolescent Relationship

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Introduction

Developmental psychopathology allows us to identify normative developmental processes, while also informing and pointing to interventions ( Cicchetti, 1984). This study explores the developmental task of adolescence: developing autonomy and maintaining relatedness (Allen & Hauser, 1996; Allen, Hauser, Eickholt, Ball, & Allen, 1994). Children of mothers with borderline personality disorder (BPD) may be at high risk for difficulties in this domain (Maccoby, 1989).

Adolescence is the time for young adults to take on issues of identity formation and autonomy, while also developing stable and enriching interpersonal relationships outside the family (Allen, McElhaney, et al., 2003; Blackmon, McElhaney, & Allen, 2001). This process prepares young adults for the challenges of choosing a career, romantic partner, and parenting (O'Malley, 2004).

"Autonomy during adolescence is typically defined as self-governance, self-organization, and independence," (2002) (Tarnow, Irwin, & Millstein, 1993). Relationality may manifest in engagement with others, curiosity about the needs and opinions of others, and the expression of validating and supportive comments (Allen, Hauser, Bell, McElhaney, & Tate, 2003). The parents' task for the promotion of autonomy is to support the adolescent's independence, and simultaneously enable relationship by promoting family cohesion and providing opportunities for acceptance (Tarnow et al., 1993).

Autonomy and relatedness, either together or individually, are associated with or predictive of adolescent: popularity, quality of romantic relationships ( Rankin-Esquer, Burnett, Baurson, & Pfeist, 1994), abstinence from drug use, academic success (Allen, Kupersmith, & Bell, 1994), feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Kem, Shellbarger, Gable, Reese, & Ryan, 2000), ego development and self-esteem (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994), and depressive and anxiety disorders (Allen, Hauser, O'Connor, Bell, & Eickholt, 1998).

Symptoms of BPD include self-harm, relationship difficulties, bingeing and purging, reckless spending, suicidal behavior, and engagement in other risk-taking behaviors (Sanuece, Milich, Dubrowski, & Butler, 2006; Westen, Lubahn, Moore, & Guellich, 1990). One way to understand the symptoms BPD is as a failure to develop autonomy and relatedness ( Bradley & Weston, 2003; Crickfield, Levy, Crick, & Kemborg, 2008). Fear of abandonment and domination can act as painful opposition within the mind of the borderline person, and interfere with forming mature and autonomous romantic, parental, and familial ties ( Melges & Swaraj, 1998).

Previous studies of mothers with BPD indicate that their children are more likely to be classified as disorganized in their attachment behavior (Hoobin, Patrick, Croudel, Garcia-Perez, & Lin, 2005) or anxious, depression, low self-esteem, aggressiveness (Barnes, Sprate, Grabe, Kowalski, & Frykberger, 2006), and attention and conduct problems (Weiss et al., 1996), and more frequently encounter family instability, parental drug use, and maternal suicide attempts (Feldman et al., 2003).

This research examines the differences mothers' and adolescents' autonomy and relatedness in maternal BPD, and a normative comparison group.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1

- Mothers with BPD, in contrast with normative comparisons, will score lower on measures of healthy autonomy and relatedness, while scoring higher on inhibiting the autonomy of their adolescents, as well as displaying increased negative interpersonal behaviors towards their adolescents.

Hypothesis 2

- Adolescents of women with BPD, in contrast with normative comparisons, will score lower on measures of healthy autonomy and relatedness, while scoring higher on inhibiting the autonomy of their mothers, as well as displaying increased negative interpersonal behaviors towards their mothers.

Hypothesis 3

- Specifically, mothers who have BPD and their adolescents will have higher scores on hostility, use of personal attack in a negotiating style, and recanting statements, relative to the normative comparisons.

Methods

Participants

- A low SES sample of N = 47 adolescents, and their mothers, N = 25 adolescents whose mothers have BPD, and N = 22 whose mothers do not have BPD.

- Adolescents 14-17 years old. See Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, and group differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>t-test</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maternal Borderline (BPD)</td>
<td></td>
<td>35.94 (15.97)</td>
<td>15.843</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent Age</td>
<td>N = 47 (M = SD)</td>
<td>N = 25 (M = SD)</td>
<td>t = 1.05</td>
<td>p = 0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal Age</td>
<td>N = 47 (M = SD)</td>
<td>N = 25 (M = SD)</td>
<td>t = 0.30</td>
<td>p = 0.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recruitment

- Mothers with BPD were recruited via client referrals and friends posted in the community.

- Comparison group recruited in Boys and Girls Clubs, high schools, and friends posted in the community.

- Participants were recruited from a five county region including both rural and urban areas.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

- Groups were matched on all demographic variables, except adolescent age. Since age did not correlate significantly with any outcome variables it was not necessary to control for it. See Table 4 for correlations among the outcome variables.

Tests of Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1

- As hypothesized, mothers with BPD scored significantly higher on the inhibition of autonomy and inhibition of relatedness than did comparisons. There were no group differences on promotion of autonomy or promotion of relatedness. See Table 3 for tests of hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2

- Contrary to hypothesis, no significant group differences were found, between the two adolescent samples. See Table 3 for tests of hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3

- As hypothesized, mothers with BPD were more likely to employ the negative behavior of blurring, and hostility; pointing to interventions (Cicchetti, 1984). This study explores the developmental task of adolescence: developing autonomy and maintaining relatedness in an adolescent-family interaction as predictors of adolescent ego development and self-esteem. (Allen, Hauser, Bell, McElhaney, & Tate, 2003).

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for autonomy and relatedness coding system in sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>t-test</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maternal Blurring</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.42 (1.51)</td>
<td>2.59*</td>
<td>0.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maternal Hostility</td>
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<td>9.08 (4.07)</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal Resistance</td>
<td></td>
<td>22.30 (6.76)</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent Blurring</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.89 (1.13)</td>
<td>2.59*</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent Hostility</td>
<td></td>
<td>9.38 (4.15)</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent Resistance</td>
<td></td>
<td>21.91 (7.68)</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

- Findings suggest that mothers with BPD do tend to bring their interpersonal deficits and fears into the parent-adolescent relationship. They exert pressure on their teens to remain dependent, and use an attacking, hostile, critical stance towards their adolescent.

- Findings also suggest that adolescents of mothers with BPD may compromise their some of self-efficacy and willingness to experiment with independence. At this critical developmental moment, these adolescent children may be hampered in their work of identity formation, and learning to think independently. They may believe that autonomy comes at the cost of a painful loss of the maternal relationship.

- Teens whose mothers have BPD tended to respond by squandering their own needs, and recanting their aspirations. These adolescents may be losing on important opportunities to form new, more mature equitable relationships with peers and romantic partners.

- Across both samples, when the mother promotes relatedness, the teen also tends to promote relatedness, both strengthening the relationship.

- Across both samples, when the mother promotes autonomy, the teen is likely to inhibit autonomy. When the mother inhibits autonomy, the teen also inhibits autonomy.

Future Directions

- Future studies should include other developmental stage-salient issues in children of women with BPD, such as attachment, school performance, internalizing and externalizing symptoms, BPD symptoms, and role reversal. Role reversal may represent a pseudo false-self that incorrectly appears healthy on measures of autonomy and relatedness.

References

- Child Development, 72(4), 927-957.