Early Childhood Representations of Parent-Child Relationships, Self, and Self-Regulation Predict Pre-Adolescent Borderline Features

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Abstract

Maternal borderline features are associated with maladaptive narrative representations of the caregiver-child relationship, self, and self-regulation in their preschool aged offspring. However, we do not know if these maladaptive representations are related to borderline features as these offspring approach adolescence. In the present study, we assessed child participants’ (n = 22) narrative representations using the MacArthur Story Stem Battery in early childhood (ages 4-6), and their borderline features (negative relationships, self harm, identity problems, and affective instability) using the Borderline Personality Features Scale for Children (BPFS-C) in pre-adolescence (ages 10-13). We hypothesized that narrative representations of negative mother, negative father, self/fantasy confusion, and destruction of objects in early childhood would positively correlate with borderline features in pre-adolescence and narrative representations of mother-child relationship expectations and father-child relationship expectations in early childhood would negatively correlate with borderline features in pre-adolescence. Results indicated that negative mother and father representations and negative mother-child relationship expectations in early childhood were associated with self-harm in pre-adolescence. Representations of destruction of objects were associated with affective instability, identity problems, and total borderline features in pre-adolescence. These results show potential pathways through which disruptions in early developmental tasks may affect development of borderline features in pre-adolescence.

Introduction

Borderline Personality Disorder

- Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is a chronic, serious psychological disorder marked by unstable relationships, fear of abandonment, identity disturbance, mood lability, and self-harm behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).
- Borderline Features (negative relationships, identity problems, affective instability, and self-harm) can be measured continuously (Morey, 1991) and are highly correlated with a diagnosis of BPD in adults (Trull, 1995) and adolescents ages 12-17 (Sharp, Ha, Michonski, Venta, & Carbone, 2012).
Borderline Features in Mothers and Offspring

- From a developmental psychopathology perspective, studying offspring of individuals with BPD can provide information about pathways to this disorder (Cicchetti, 1984; Lenzenweger & Cicchetti, 2005; Macfie, 2009).
- Maternal borderline features are correlated with borderline features in their adolescent offspring (Watkins et al., 2011, April).
- Through what pathways might maternal borderline features influence the development of those features in their offspring?
- The current study will examine how maladaptive early narrative representations related to attachment, self-development, and emotion regulation might represent one such pathway.

Narrative Representations in Offspring of Mothers with BPD

- The MacArthur Story Stem Battery is a narrative-based assessment tool used to measure preschool-aged children’ emotional experiences and representations of themselves and important relationships (Bretherton, Oppenheim, Buchsbaum, Emde, & The MacArthur Narrative Group, 1990; Holmberg, Robinson, Corbitt-Price, & Wiener, 2007).
- Maternal borderline features are correlated with maladaptive child-caregiver, self, and emotion regulation representations in the narratives of their preschool-aged offspring (Macfie & Swan, 2009).
- Mothers with BPD are more likely to have preoccupied/unresolved attachment representations, and this maternal preoccupied/unresolved attachment style is correlated with narrative representations indicative of disruptions in attachment, self-development, and emotion regulation in their pre-school aged offspring (Macfie, Swan, Fitzpatrick, Watkins, & Rivas, 2014).
- The current study will expand upon these studies and examine the correlation between maladaptive narrative representations in early childhood and borderline features in pre-adolescence.

The Current Study

- However, it is not known if these early maladaptive representations indeed predict the development of borderline features as children approach adolescence.
- The current study is a follow-up to the study discussed in Macfie & Swan (2009), which found that maternal borderline features were related to maladaptive offspring narrative representations of child-caregiver, self, and emotion regulation in early childhood.
Hypotheses

1) Narrative representations of *negative mother, negative father, self/fantasy confusion, and destruction of objects* in early childhood will positively correlate with borderline features in pre-adolescence.

2) Narrative representations of *mother-child relationship expectations and father-child relationship expectations* in early childhood will negatively correlate with borderline features in pre-adolescence.

Method

Participants

- Participants for this study were $N = 22$ children ($n = 14$ females) who were recruited from a clinical and community sample. There were two sets of siblings in the sample, therefore there were 20 mother participants total.
- 3 of the 20 mothers’ borderline features were in the “clinical” range (Total PAI-BOR score $>38$) at Time 2 (Trull, 1995).
- At Time 1, participants were ages 4-6 ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 0.86$)
- At Time 2, participants were ages 10-13 ($M = 11.66$, $SD = 1.12$)
- The mean time elapsed between Time 1 and 2 was 6.03 years ($SD = 1.45$)
- 100% of the sample was Caucasian, with one participant also identifying as Hispanic. See Table 1 for Demographic Information.

Measures

**Narrative Representations (Time 1).** When participants were pre-schoolers, they completed the MacArthur Story Stem Battery (Bretherton et al., 1990) in a laboratory setting. These narratives were reliably coded for *self/fantasy confusion, destruction of objects, positive mother representations, negative mother representations, positive father representations, negative father representations* (Robinson, Mantz-Simmons, Macfie, & The MacArthur Narrative Group, 2009), *mother-child relationship expectations, and father-child relationship expectations* (Bickham & Fiese, 1999).

**Borderline Features (Time 2).** When participants were pre-adolescents, they completed the Borderline Personality Features Scale for Children (BPFS-C). The BPFS-C is a self-report measure of borderline features for children that consists of 4 subscales: *affective instability, identity problems, negative relationships, self-harm* (Crick, Murray-Close, & Woods, 2005). The BPFS-C is highly correlated with diagnosis of BPD in adolescents (Sharp et al., 2012).

Results

**Hypothesis 1.** Results partially supported hypothesis 1. Results indicated that representations of destruction of objects in early childhood narratives was marginally correlated with total borderline features in pre-adolescence and significantly correlated with affective instability and
identity disturbance in pre-adolescence. Negative father representations were significantly correlated with self-harm in pre-adolescence and negative mother representations were marginally correlated with self-harm in pre-adolescence. See Table 2.

**Hypothesis 2.** Results partially supported hypothesis 2. Results indicated that representations of mother-child relationship expectations in early childhood narratives were negatively correlated with self-harm in pre-adolescence.

**Discussion**

- We know that maternal borderline features are related to disruptions in representations of attachment, self-regulation, self-development in offspring in early childhood (Macfie & Swan, 2009).
- The present study is the first to investigate disruptions in these representations as predictors of borderline features in pre-adolescence.
- In the present study, the maladaptive narrative representation related to disruption in emotion regulation (destruction of objects) in early childhood was associated with affective instability, identity problems, and total borderline features in pre-adolescence.
  - Linehan has conceptualized BPD as being a disorder characterized by emotional dysregulation (Crowell, Beauchaine, & Linehan, 2009; Linehan, 1993).
  - These results suggest that early problems with emotion regulation precede the development of borderline features in pre-adolescence.
- In the present study, maladaptive narrative representations related to disruptions in attachment/caregiver-child relationship (negative mother and father representations, lower mother-child relationship expectations) in early childhood were associated with self-harm in pre-adolescence.
  - Insecure attachment styles and interpersonal problems in adults are associated with self-harm and suicidal behaviors (Stepp et al., 2008)
  - These results provide further evidence that early disruptions in attachment and important caregiver-child relationships are associated with later self-harm.
- Overall, the results of the present study show potential pathways through which maternal borderline features and disruptions in early developmental tasks may affect development of borderline features in pre-adolescence.
- Future longitudinal research should investigate if maladaptive representations in early childhood mediate the relationship between mothers’ and adolescents’ borderline features.
Table 1.

**Demographic Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable (N = 22)</th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time 1 Pre-Adolescent Age (years)</td>
<td>5.56 (.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2 Pre-Adolescent Age (years)</td>
<td>11.66 (1.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2 Family Income ($)</td>
<td>32,013 (37,088)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2 Hollingshead Score</td>
<td>41.64 (17.67)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total (%)**

| Minority Ethnic Status of Pre-Adolescent | 1 (5%) |
| Female Pre-Adolescents                | 14 (64%) |
| Mother has GED/H.S. Diploma           | 19 (86%) |
Table 2.

*Bivariate Correlations Between Offspring Narrative Representations in Early Childhood and Their Own Borderline Features in Pre-Adolescence*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offspring Narrative Variables (Time 1)</th>
<th>Offspring Borderline Features (Time 2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affective Instability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment/Parent-Child Relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative Mother Representations</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative Father Representations</td>
<td>0.27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother-Child Relationship Expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Father-Child Relationship Expectations</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self/Fantasy Confusion</td>
<td>0.23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotion Regulation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destruction of Objects</td>
<td>0.50*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† = $p < .10$    * = $p < .05$    ** = $p < .01$
References


Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, 38(5), 592-607. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1521/suli.2008.38.5.592


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