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The Effects of Mothers' Depression on the Behavioral Assessment of Disruptive Child Behavior

Margaret L. McFarland¹ & Matthew R. Sanders²

1.1 Aim

This study uses a group design to compare depressed and non-depressed mothers and their disruptive children. It controls for broad environmental stress factors to examine whether specific differences between groups can be linked with mothers' depression. It aims to build a more comprehensive picture of depressed mothers' interactions with their disruptive children by comparing these interactions with those of similar, but non-maternally depressed mother-child dyads, and a non-clinic control group.

2.1 Hypotheses

This study compares three groups of mother-child dyads: depressed women with disruptive children, non-depressed women with disruptive children and non-clinic women and children and tests three basic hypotheses:

1. Family Environment hypothesis: Husbands of depressed women will experience higher levels of depression than those of non-depressed women.
2. Behavioral hypothesis 1: While disruptive children display more overall negative behaviour than non-clinic children, disruptive children of depressed mothers display more distressed behaviour, as determined by observation of parent-child interaction, than either non-clinic controls or disruptive children of non-depressed women.
3. Behavioral hypothesis 2: Because of the lowered rates of activity characteristics of depression, depressed mothers of disruptive children display less child-directed aversive behaviour, as determined by direct observation of parent-child interaction, than non-depressed mothers of disruptive children.

3.1 Results

Family Environment hypothesis: Fathers of all disruptive children reported elevated levels of depression, compared with the non-clinic control group. In the depressed mothers group, fathers' depression was significantly higher than either of the other two groups and fell into the mildly clinically depressed range.

Behavioral hypothesis 1 received little support.

Behavioral hypothesis 2: The lack of differences between the three parent groups on negative parent behaviour contradicts some prior research.

4.1 Findings

While further investigation into the role of fathers' parenting interactions is clearly needed, these results support an overall conclusion that the repertoire of difficult behaviours displayed by disruptive children is relatively consistent, regardless of parent emotional state, at least within the age-group studied here.

5.1 Summary and Implications

This paper investigates some characteristics of families with disruptive children and depressed mothers, and compares the observed behaviours of disruptive children of depressed and non-depressed mothers. Evidence for co-morbid internalizing disorder in disruptive children is present in both depressed mothers' and fathers' evaluative reports. However, results suggest that disruptive child behaviour disorders are remarkably consistent in behavioural presentation, whether the mother suffers from depression or not.

This consistency in child disruptive behaviour repertoires suggests that the core components of behavioural family therapy for families of disruptive children where the mother suffer from depression need to be different from those delivered to others families.

1. School of Education, The University of Queensland, Australia
2. School of Psychology, The University of Queensland, Australia