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ABSTRACT

A 3-year longitudinal study of children at risk for depression was completed, studying children (aged 8-16) of unipolar depressed, bipolar, chronically medically ill, and normal women. Nearly 100 children from 68 families were included, and the psychiatric status and functioning of the mothers and children were studied at 6-month intervals. Mothers and children were observed discussing an area of disagreement. Observations showed that unipolar women were the most negative and withdrawn; children's outcomes were specific to the communication dimension; and depressed mood was most strongly associated with withdrawal and poor task focus. Observations indicated a reciprocity of dysfunctional interactions in the family. Children's utterances showed criticism directed toward depressed mothers. Depressed mothers were specifically negative toward children with difficulties. A unique between-sibling sample of children where one was doing well and the other was not, indicated that mothers interacted differently with each. Difficulties in the quality of the mother-child relationship, and also the impact of each other's difficulties on the other, caused symptomatology. It was concluded that maternal background factors such as personal experiences in her family, current mood and stress situations, and child's own behavior, all contributed to the quality of the interaction. Further study is needed to understand maternal depressive behavior and the impact on the child. (BHK)

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Mother-Child Interactions in Families of Depressed Women

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A 3-year longitudinal study of children at risk for depression has recently been completed, studying 8-16 year-old children of unipolar depressed, bipolar, chronically medically ill, and normal women. Nearly 100 children from 68 families were included, and the psychiatric status and functioning of the mothers and children were studied at 6-month intervals. The original battery included observations of the mothers and their children discussing an area of disagreement, and data from the Conflict Discussion task are the basis of this talk. [Citations for articles are listed in the Appendix]. I will discuss data concerning 3 topics:

1. Information about the communication behaviors of the mothers
2. Reciprocity of mother-child relationship problems
3. Family relations as stressors contributing to symptoms

In the course of discussing these topics, there are 3 themes that I want to emphasize: SPECIFICITY, CONTEXT, PERPETUATION (Slide 1)

Communication dysfunction in depressed women.

a). Unipolar women are the most negative and withdrawn GROUP MEANS ON CONFLICT TASK (Slide 2, Gordon et al., 1988)

b). Children's outcomes are specific to the communication dimension (balance of positive/negative is associated with negative self concept, diagnoses of depression, school behavior, academic performance. Task productivity is associated especially with school behavior) CHILD OUTCOMES AT 6 MOS (Slide 3, Burge & Hammen, 1991).

c). Specific predictors of maternal dimensions. Depression is

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multifaceted, involving irritability and negative cognitions, withdrawal and unresponsiveness, and others. It appears from regression analyses (Burge & Hammen, 1991) that depressed mood is most strongly associated with withdrawal and poor task focus, while chronic stress is especially associated with negativism and criticism by the mothers.

Reciprocity of dysfunctional interactions in the family

Mothers' interaction difficulties are not a one-way street. There are several indicators of mutuality of negativism:

- a). children's utterances show a lot of criticism directed toward depressed mothers.
- b). depressed women are not indiscriminantly negative; they are specifically negative toward their children who have difficulties, and accurately perceive the child's problems compared to nondepressed women. CONRAD FIGURE (Slide 4, Conrad & Hammen, 1989).
- c). a unique between-sibling sample of kids where one is doing well and the other one not, indicating that their mothers actually interacted differently with them. SIBLING COMPARISONS (Slide 5, Anderson & Hammen).

Thus, the patterns are consistent less with global impairment by depressed women than by a reciprocal system in which maternal depression, negative interactions, and child dysfunction contribute to each other.

Family relations as stressors.

Difficulties in the quality of the mother-child relationship, and also the impact of each other's difficulties on the other, cause symptomatology.

- a). The timing of episodes across the longitudinal time period indicates significant temporal associations of mother & child disorders in general, and major depression in particular (Hammen, Adrian, & Burge, 1991).
- b). Additionally, maternal symptoms act as a stressor predicting children's

subsequent depression, as do children's own stressful life events. However, the most potent predictor of children's depression status over time is the interaction of maternal symptoms and child stressors. STRESS BUFFERING (Slide 6, Hammen, Adrian, & Burge, 1991).

c). The collection of enormous amounts of data on stressful life events of both mothers and children indicate a stress generation effect: both have significantly higher rates of stressors of an interpersonal kind, of which they are partly the cause (see Hammen, in press).

Conclusions

Need further work to understand what kinds of maternal depressive behaviors have what kinds of impacts on areas of children's functioning--social, cognitive, self, etc. Also, what is specific to depressed women? What maternal relationship qualities might be specific predictors of depression in kids?

Context cannot be ignored: maternal background factors such as her own experiences in her family, her current mood and stress situations, and the child's own behaviors, all contribute to the quality of the interaction. Such diverse variables make our work enormously complex, but otherwise the study of simple variables may provide misleading results.

Finally, the qualities and characteristics we observed need to be studied further to learn more about the ways in which mothers and children both cause stressors that in turn contribute to their further symptomatology. The social and interpersonal functioning of depressed persons is an area of apparent vulnerability, warranting further study.

Articles from the UCLA Family Stress Project on
Children at Risk for Affective Disorders

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Family Communications Issues to Emphasize

- **Specificity**
maternal behavior
child outcome
- **Context**
maternal background
current stress and circumstances
child qualities
- **Perpetuation of Distress**
mother-child reciprocity
mutual stressors/low support

UCLA Family Stress Project

Conflict Discussion Task

Unipolar Bipolar Medical Normal

Produc	.26	.45	.37	.42
Off - task	.21	.00	.08	.08
Positive	.05	.09	.11	.10
Negative	.16	.09	.06	.03

Table 4: Hierarchical Regression Analyses to Predict Children's Outcomes at Six Months

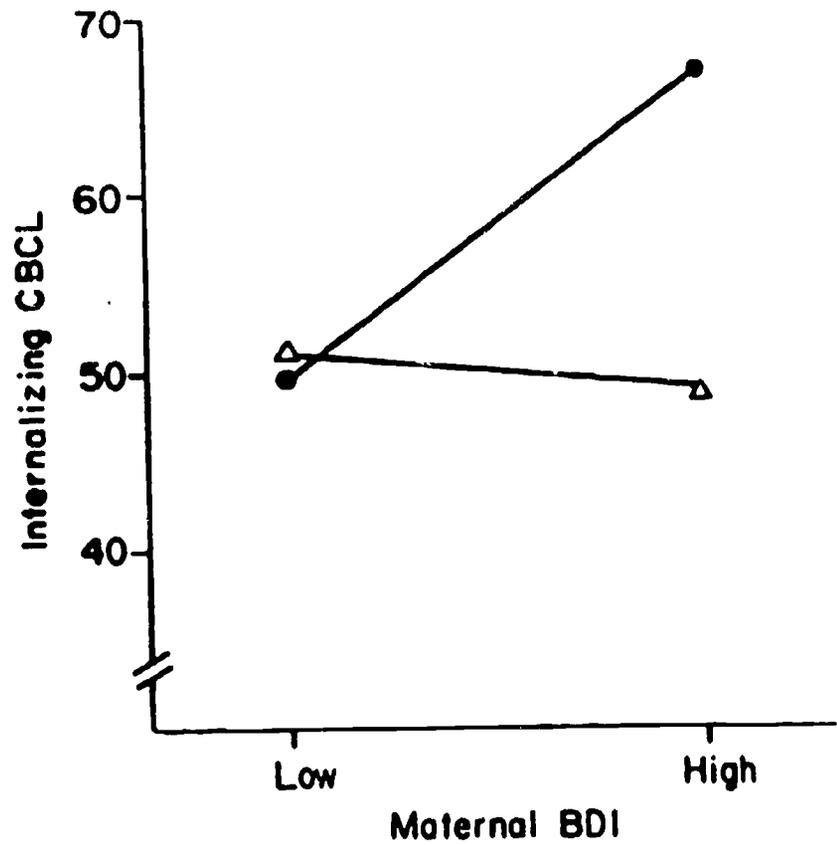
Variable	Incremental R^2 when entered last		
	Positivity	Task productivity	Overall R^2
Affective diagnosis	.08 ^{**}	.05 [*]	.20 ^{**}
	$F(2, 55) = 6.88, p < .01.$		
Nonaffective diagnosis	.06 [*]	.00	.06
	$F(2, 55) = 1.87, p > .05.$		
School behavior rating	.07 ^{**}	.08 ^{**}	.24 ^{**}
	$F(2, 56) = 8.70, p < .001.$		
Academic performance rating	.06 ^{**}	.04	.16 ^{**}
	$F(2, 55) = 5.25, p < .01.$		

* = $p > .05 < .10.$

** = $p < .05.$

From "Maternal Communication: A Predictor of Outcomes at Follow-Up in a Sample of Children at Risk for Depression" by D. Burge and C. Hammen, unpublished.

Combined Internalizing Variables



- △ Less Symptomatic Children
- More Symptomatic Children

Figure 1. Maternal perceptions of child internalizing disorder as a function of maternal depression and symptomatology of the child. ("More symptomatic" children refers to those scoring above the median on a composite score of the Children's Depression Inventory and diagnosis of internalizing disorders. CBCL = Child Behavior Checklist. BDI = Beck Depression Inventory.)

From "Role of Maternal Depression in Perceptions of Child Maladjustment" by M. Conrad and C. Hammen, 1989, Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 57, p. 665. Reprinted by permission.

Within-Family Comparisons

Mother-Sibling Interactions

	Diagnosed Sib	Well Sib	Control
Positivity	-.20	-.09	-.03
Negative Comments (proportion)	.26	.16	.09