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Gender and Parenting Stress
Using Abidin's Parenting Stress Index

Thesis submitted to
The Graduate College of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Psychology

by

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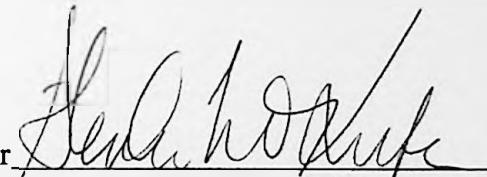
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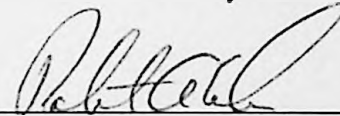
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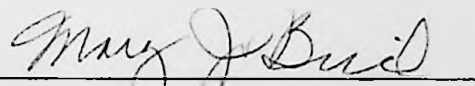
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Abstract

The effect of gender on parenting stress was studied on a sample of 56 parents at the time of custody disputes. Each pair of parents completed the Parenting Stress Index or the Parenting Stress Index/Short Form. Results were not significant when gender was matched to the total parent stress scores, indicating parent child stress was not associated with parent gender as was found in previous research.

Acknowledgments

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Gender and Parenting Stress

Using Abidin's Parenting Stress Index

Due to society's ever increasing difficulties with child behavior problems, researchers have turned their studies to finding a model to explain conditions affecting child behavior. Towards this end Abidin, according to his model of parenting stress, created the Parenting Stress Index (PSI) and subsequently the Parenting Stress Index/Short Form (PSI/SF).

Some resulting research surrounding the PSI has identified the existence of gender differences in parenting stress (Webster Stratton, 1990) and some has not (Baker, 1994). If there are gender differences in parental stress, successful use of the PSI or PSI/SF should be viewed accordingly. The following study is an attempt to investigate the existence of possible gender differences in parenting stress using the PSI/SF.

Abidin's model provides the theoretical basis of his Parenting Stress Index. Parenting stress, according to Abidin, is the result of the parents' view of their parenting role as beneficial or detrimental to themselves. It is impacted by external and internal support resulting in parenting practices, thus impacting child behavior (Abidin, 1992).

Initiation into parenthood is viewed as one of life's most stressful events. The stress associated with the role of parent is impacted by parent characteristics, child characteristics, marital relationship and role restrictions. These in turn are

filtered through resources such as social support, parenting alliance, parenting skills and competencies, material resources and cognitive coping. Parenting practices are the result which produce child outcomes (Abidin, 1992). The PSI serves as a screening and diagnostic assessment to measure the amount of stress in the parent-child dyad (McBride, 1989).

In further development of the parenting stress model, study found sex differences in response to stress types (Lennon, 1987). Disruptive child behavior has been found to correlate with maternal distress (Eyberg, Boggs, and Radriguez, 1992). Mothers were found to experience significantly more stress than fathers in conjunction with low marital satisfaction, difficult children, lack of support and other external effects (Webster-Stratton, 1988). Mothers experiencing low marital satisfaction and high life stress showed increased parental demands and criticisms and fathers did not (Webster-Stratton, 1989).

There are different theories to explain possible gender differences in reaction to stress. Some believe women's higher rates of psychological distress are generated by gender roles (Lennon, 1987). Women are seen sometimes as having greater vulnerability to certain life stresses, and are affected by both their own stresses and those they care about (Wethington, McLeod, and Kessler, 1987). Barnett and Baruch (1987) identified both social role gender difference and sex role or biological gender difference in stress reaction. Both theories see a difference between genders in reaction to stressor type.

Marital status affects parents and children, and is another dimension in the parenting stress model. The unmarried have been found to experience more

problems dealing with life's stress than the married (Pearlin and Johnson, 1977). When parents divorce, children experience lower well being compared to children of intact families (Amato and Keith, 1991). One study found single fathers more vulnerable to certain types of stress (Simon, 1998). Divorce creates additional stress for both parents and children.

Parenting stress for fathers becomes an issue with institution of the new shared parenting divorce law in West Virginia. Fathers have rights to equal time with, and responsibilities for, their dependent children since the enactment of the new West Virginia family divorce code effective January 1, 2000 (W. V. Family Law, 2000).

Parent perceptions have been found to influence parenting stress. There is conflicting research surrounding gender differences in perceptions of child behaviors. There was only a small difference between mothers' and fathers' perception of child behaviors (Baker, 1994). Even when perceptions differed, parenting stress showed little difference between genders (Baker, 1994).

Fathers' perceptions of their own parenting competence also contributes to parenting stress. An inverse relationship between the fathers' perceived sense of competence in parenting and the amount of stress they are experiencing in their parental role was found (McBride, 1989). There was a correlation between the fathers' perceptions of the child's demandingness and their own perceived parental competence. As perceptions of demandingness increased, perceptions of their own parental competence decreased (McBride, 1989). There is also a

difference in perceptions between genders with mothers seeing themselves as less competent than fathers (Webster-Stratton, 1988).

In general, literature and research report women experience significantly higher rates of stress than men. (Wethington, et al., 1987). Depression is associated with psychological distress (Pearlin and Johnson, 1977). Depression is an easily measured indication of distress and mental illness. Females typically react to stress with depression and males exhibit alcohol abuse (Simon, 1998).

The PSI uses depression as a subscale. When you examine the depression subscale, questions focus on typically female symptoms of depression. No substance abuse questions are incorporated into the scale. Historically, research in the area of parenting stress and child behavior has centered on the mothers' reports because they were more easily accessible to researchers and because the mother is usually the parent active in the treatment of the child. Due to the reliance of the PSI on depression, females would score higher stress scores than males (Simon, 1998). Considering these two facts, and the absence of males in prior research, the purpose of this study was to determine if there is a difference in parenting stress between genders, equally represented, using the PSI/SF.

Method

Included in the study were 52 subjects drawn from Putnam and Kanawha Counties, West Virginia Family Law Master Courts and the files of a local mental health agency. Twenty-six couples involved in child custody cases participated by completing Abidin's Parenting Stress Index or Parenting Stress Index/Short Form. Each parenting partner completed the PSI on the same dependent child. The Law Master couples were quickly briefed on the purpose of the study and given an informed consent to sign. They completed the 10-minute, paper and pencil, Short Form of the PSI with anonymous data filled in at the top. Permission was obtained from the mental health agency to review case files provided the identities of the clients were protected. To combine the archival PSI scores with the results of the PSI/SF, the PSI/SF questions were extracted from the PSI and scored again according to the SF standards.

A total of 26 mothers and 26 matching fathers completed the PSI/SF. The mean age for mothers was 29 and for fathers 31. A matching 26 children were the subjects of their parents' PSI/SF, 10 male children and 16 female children. The male children ranged in age from 1 to 15, with the mean age of 6.2. The 16 female children ranged in age from 1 to 14, with a mean age of 6.7. Individual parents fell into five socio-economic groups: low, low middle, middle, middle-high, and high. Due to the lack of subjects in the high and middle-high range, the last two groups were bunched together for statistical purposes. This resulted in low, low-middle, middle, and middle-high/high groups with 12 falling in the low,

13 in the low-middle, 27 in the middle, and 4 in the middle-high/high range. The mean stress score for low was 63, for low middle 60, for middle 38, and for middle high/high 38.

Instrument

Abidin's Parenting Stress Index (PSI) and Parenting Stress Index/Short Form (PSI/SF) were developed to measure the stress within the parent-child unit (Mouton and Tuma, 1988). There are three factors used in an attempt to measure the constructs of parent esteem, parent child interaction and child self-regulation (Abidin, 1995). The three subscales of the PSI/SF are Parental Distress, Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction, and Difficult Child. The Total Stress score indicates the amount of parenting stress being experienced by the subject (Abidin, 1995). Individuals with total stress scores above 85 percentile are experiencing clinically significant levels of stress. For the purposes of this study, the only focus was on the Total Stress score.

The PSI/SF reliability on the test-retest sample of 800 subjects over a six-month period resulted in .91 coefficient alpha for Total Stress. Correlation between the PSI/SF and the full length PSI for 530 subjects resulted in a .94 Total Stress correlation (Abidin, 1995). Further independent validity studies for the PSI/SF do not exist. However, the full length PSI correlated well with the Child Behavior Scale (CBS), Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (ECBI), and the Family Resources Scale (FRS), Child Abuse Potential Inventory (CAP), as well as others measuring the same constructs as the PSI (Abidin, 1995).

When comparing the PSI to the PSI/SF researchers developed a three-factor formula that best described all the data of the full length PSI. Using a factor analysis with a varimax rotation, the factors with the highest loadings were kept. Then there was a replication on a second sample. Results of both analysis found the structure of PSI/SF stable and the PSI adequately replicated in the Short Form (Abidin, 1995).

The PSI/SF contains 36 items divided into the three major domains developed from factor loadings of test subjects taking the full length PSI. The factors were labeled PD, P-CDI, and DC, or Parent Domain, Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction, and Difficult Child, respectively. The Parent Distress subscale represents the distress or success the parent feels as a parent (Abidin, 1995). Questions focus on depression, role restriction, isolation and spouse support (Abidin, 1995). Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction focuses on the parent's perception of his/her child and the interactions between parent and child (Abidin, 1995). The Difficult Child subscale addresses the child's behaviors that make parenting either more or less difficult. (Abidin, 1995). Some of these characteristics include adaptability, demandingness, mood, and distractibility/hyperactivity. Alpha reliability coefficients were reported to be .95, and test-retest reliability ranged from .82 to .71 (Abidin, 1995).

Results

No significant findings indicated a gender difference in parenting stress following an analysis of variance using total stress scores and gender from the PSI and PSI/SF. An additional analysis of variance was run comparing fathers' total parenting stress and number of days with the child. Including all fathers regardless of age, a significant effect for number of days was found ($F = 5$, $Sig. = .02$). Fathers with more days of child contact reported more stress than those with fewer days. Examination of the socioeconomic status yielded no significant relationship findings to parenting stress.

Discussion

Prior findings showed increased mothers' parenting stress in the presence of marital discord and singleness (Webster-Stratton, 1989). With no gender parenting stress differences found in the present study involving custody disputes we may infer fathers' parenting stress also increases in the presence of marital dispute and when fathers spend additional parenting time with a dependent child.

Samples from studies finding differences were drawn from clinical populations seeking treatment for child behavior problems (Webster Stratton, 1989). Previous studies finding no gender differences were drawn from non-clinic populations (Deater-Deckard and Scarr, 1996). This study used either non clinic subjects or subjects from clinic settings where the child was not the identified patient.

Based on the factor formula used to develop the SPI/SF from the PSI and their .94 total stress correlation, results from one study using the PSI can be compared to results from another study using the PSI/SF.

Results from this study indicate there is no gender difference in parenting stress using the PSI.

More studies in the area of parenting stress should be done with the goal of including fathers. Most studies have focused on mothers' parenting stress because mothers were the accompanying parent and most involved with their children (Deater-Deckard, 1996).

This study included an equal number of fathers and mothers. With increased amount of time with their child came an increase in parenting stress. In consideration of the new West Virginia Family Law entitling fathers to equal parenting rights, further study in the area of fathers and parenting stress is warranted. Implications for family support professionals include increased services and focus on the fathers with greater role responsibilities.

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