



Labored love: Examining the link between maternal depression and parenting behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Theoretical perspectives suggest a strong link between maternal mental health and parenting, which may facilitate the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage from depressed mothers to their children. In this paper, I extend prior research by using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study ($N = 3659$). Pooled OLS and random-effects regression models document a strong link between maternal depression and the following parenting behaviors: neglect, psychological aggression, physical assault, and engagement. Fixed-effects models, however, show little evidence that changes in maternal depression are linked to changes in parenting behaviors, suggesting some negative consequences of depression are driven by variation across individuals or unobserved time-invariant characteristics. Further, the consequences of depression for parenting behaviors do not vary by mother's marital status, suggesting that marriage may not be protective with respect to the parenting behaviors of depressed mothers.

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1. Introduction

Depression is a common mental health condition that affects more than 10% of people in the United States annually, and lifetime prevalence rates are even higher (Kessler and Zhao, 1999). Some subgroups of the population – including the unmarried or poorly educated – are especially susceptible to depression and depressive episodes (Kessler and Zhao, 1999; Meadows et al., 2008). Women are also more vulnerable to depression than men, and some evidence suggests that mothers with children – compared to their childless counterparts – are especially likely to report depression (Cowan and Cowan, 1992). The consequences of maternal depression are far-reaching, and a burgeoning literature documents how depression among mothers affects individuals and families. Depression and other mental illnesses, for example, impair a single mother's likelihood of marriage (Teitler and Reichman, 2008). Depressed mothers also report lower quality relationships with their romantic partners and are more likely to report material hardship (Frech and Williams, 2007; Heflin and Iceland, 2009; Kim and McKenry, 2002).

In addition to the wide-ranging consequences that depression may have for the sufferer, a large, robust literature documents that children are particularly vulnerable to maternal depression. Children of depressed mothers, compared to their counterparts never exposed to maternal depression, have worse behavioral outcomes throughout the life course (Goodman and Gotlib, 2002; Turney, forthcoming). One pathway through which depressed mothers may transmit disadvantages to their children may be through parenting behaviors such as discipline. Indeed, empirical research consistently finds that depressed mothers may be limited in their capacity to parent effectively (Gotlib and Goodman, 1999; Kiernan and Huerta, 2008; Lovejoy et al., 2000; Marmorstein et al., 2004). Depressed mothers, for example, may be less empathetic, more

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aggressive, and less emotionally responsive to their children than their non-depressed counterparts (Feng et al., 2007; Lovejoy et al., 2000; Silberg and Rutter, 2002). In addition, maternal depression is linked to greater negative interactions and fewer positive interactions with children (Cummings and Davies, 1994; Lovejoy et al., 2000). Given children's sensitivities to parenting behaviors, and the implications of parenting for children's life course trajectories, understanding the link between maternal depression and parenting is crucial (Belsky, 1984).

Though existing literature documents a strong link between maternal depression and parenting behaviors, there are several opportunities to extend this literature. Many existing conclusions, for example, come from small, non-representative samples with limited generalizability. Often times, samples are limited to clinical populations or non-clinical groups that are homogenous with respect to race, socioeconomic status, or marital status (for an exception, see Kiernan and Huerta, 2008). The fact that little research exists on the consequences of maternal depression for parenting behaviors among unmarried mothers is a particularly stark omission, given the substantial demographic changes of the past five decades (Ellwood and Jencks, 2004). Children born to unmarried parents now account for nearly 40% of all children born in the United States, and researchers are only beginning to examine how this diverse and generally disadvantaged group of children fares (Hamilton et al., 2009). In addition, there are likely important unobserved differences between depressed and non-depressed mothers that are not captured by most existing research. Many prior examinations rely on cross-sectional data or OLS regression models that make it impossible to account for unobserved heterogeneity or discern the causal ordering between maternal depression and parenting.

Given theoretical perspectives and empirical research that suggest far-reaching consequences of depression, and some limitations of existing research, in this paper, I examine the link between maternal depression and parenting behaviors. I use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal survey of nearly 5000 new and mostly unmarried parents in 20 US cities who gave birth between 1998 and 2000. Mothers were first interviewed in the hospital when their children were born, and were re-interviewed when their children were about 1, 3, and 5 years old. Using these data, I examine how maternal depression is linked to a wide range of parenting behaviors: neglect, discipline (including both psychological aggression and physical assault), and engagement. I pay particular attention to differences in this association between mothers married and unmarried at the birth of their child. Though these four indicators of parenting behaviors are not exhaustive of all ways mothers interact with their young children, they capture both positive and negative dimensions of parenting and provide a solid foundation for understanding the consequences of maternal depression for the broader family system (Lovejoy et al., 2000). Furthermore, all of these parenting behaviors have strong, robust associations with wellbeing in early childhood, a crucial period in the life course when children are placed on often static educational and socioemotional trajectories (Entwisle and Alexander, 1989; Pianta and Cox, 1999).

2. Background

Given the large number of individuals and families affected by depression, as well as the unequal distribution of depression across the population, understanding the consequences of mental health disparities is important for understanding broader stratification processes (Kessler and Zhao, 1999; Yu and Williams, 1999). It is well known that depressed mothers may transmit disadvantages to their children. Children of depressed mothers, compared to their counterparts with non-depressed mothers, are more likely to have impaired social, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes throughout the life course (Dodge, 1990; Downey and Coyne, 1990; Goodman and Gotlib, 2002). The mechanisms through which maternal depression affects children are not fully understood, but some evidence suggests maternal parenting behaviors may be one important pathway. A recent examination of families in the United Kingdom, for example, found that three types of parenting behaviors – reading activities, mother–child relations, and discipline practices – mediated the link between maternal depression and young children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Kiernan and Huerta, 2008). Other research arrives at similar conclusions (Conger et al., 2002).

Additionally, as mentioned above, understanding the relationship between maternal depression and parenting behaviors is critical because favorable parenting behaviors are consistently linked to child wellbeing (Amato and Fowler, 2002; Elder et al., 2003; Simons et al., 1994). For example, children neglected by their mothers are more likely than their non-neglected counterparts to have internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, as well as other socioemotional difficulties (Hildyard and Wolfe, 2002; Tyler et al., 2006). Similarly, children have more behavior problems when parents report physical discipline (Bodovski and Youn, 2010). Disadvantages in early childhood behaviors often translate to disadvantages throughout adolescence and adulthood, which makes it particularly important to understand the social antecedents of problem behaviors in early childhood (Elder et al., 2003).

2.1. Maternal depression as a predictor of maternal parenting behaviors

Belsky's (1984) process model of parenting suggests that parents' psychological resources are the most important determinant of how they parent their children and, thus, may reproduce the existing social structure. Though other aspects of the social environment predict parenting behaviors, depression may be an important, direct link to parenting (Belsky, 1984). This is consistent with other theoretical perspectives that suggest depression impairs the sufferer's interpersonal relationships and functioning; it is likely that worse parenting behaviors is one manifestation of such impairments (Coyne, 1976).

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