Examining Moderators of Parental Reflective Functioning and Maternal Parenting Behavior towards Toddlers

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Introduction

Parental reflective functioning refers to the parent’s capacity to identify and understand their child’s mental states. It has been shown to play an important role in the intergenerational transmission of attachment (Slade et al., 2005).

The Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (PRFQ; Luyten et al., 2009) is a self-report measure that examines three elements of parental reflective functioning:

- Pre-mentalizing (PM), which includes an inability to hold the child's mental states in mind and/or malevolent attributions about the child’s behavior
- Certainty about the child’s mental states (CMS), refers to an acknowledgement that a parent’s thoughts about the child's mental states are accurate
- Interest and curiosity in child’s mental states (IC; Luyten et al., 2014), which involves an interest in thinking about their child’s mental states

While research has linked parental reflective functioning with various parent and child correlates, there is little to no research investigating the PRFQ, a self-report measure, with observed parenting measures. The current study sought to explore factors that may moderate the relationship between parental reflective functioning and parenting behaviors.

Methods

Participants

- Maternal Age: Mean = 26 years
- Race: African American = 47%, Caucasian = 36%, Biracial = 12%, Other = 5%
- Monthly Income: Median = $1500; 73% receive services from WIC and 76% have public health insurance
- Education: Some college = 57%, High school or less = 20%, College or graduate degree = 13%
- Family status: Single parents = 64%; First-time mothers = 30%

Procedures

A community sample of pregnant women (N=120) was recruited for a prospective longitudinal study on parenting. The current study utilized data from the fourth and fifth waves of data collection (n = 80), when the child was 2- and 3-years old, respectively. At T5, the women were videotaped participating in a 10-minute free play interaction with their child. Free-play interactions were coded to assess maternal behavior and affect by reliable undergraduate and graduate students trained by an “expert coder.”

Measures

The Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (PRFQ; Luyten et al., 2009) was used at T4 to measure parental reflective functioning. Items associated with the Pre-mentalizing subscale were reverse-scored so that higher scores indicated fewer pre-mentalizing tendencies. A total reflective functioning score was then calculated from the new PM subscale along with the Certainty and Interest and Curiosity subscales.

The Parenting Relationship Questionnaire (PRQ; Kamphaus & Reynolds, 2006) was used at T4 to measure aspects of the parenting relationship. The Involvement (α = .84) and Confidence (α = .80) subscales were used.

Observed maternal behavior was assessed at T5 using a Likert scale from 1-5, where higher scores indicate greater levels of behavior (Gallagher & Huth-Bocks, 2011). The current study utilized ratings of covert hostility, which consists of indirect forms of hostility by the mother towards the child, such as sarcasm or mocking (ICCs range from .55 -. 86).

Results

Moderation models were created using the PROCESS approach (Hayes, 2013). Results indicated that maternal involvement moderated the relationship between parental reflective functioning and covert hostility. As reflective functioning scores increase, levels of covert hostility decreased for women who reported moderate and high levels of involvement (95% CI = -.06 -.01).

Discussion

The results from the current study suggest that maternal involvement and confidence serve to moderate the relationship between parental reflective functioning and covertly hostile parenting behavior for women who reported moderate and high levels of these traits. Reflective functioning did not appear to impact levels of covert hostility women who reported low levels of involvement or confidence. It may be that these women have other significant risk factors that are impeding their ability to understand their child’s mental states. It may also be that these women may not be engaged enough with their children to display covertly hostile behavior. Specifically, women’s mean levels of covert hostility remained low regardless of their level of parental reflective functioning.

Finally, our results emphasize the importance of increasing parental reflective functioning, as well as the mother’s sense of involvement with her child, in order to decrease instances of negative parenting, such as covert hostility, which may contribute to negative child outcomes.