Maternal Appraisal of Childhood Relationships, Current Relationships, and Childhood Trauma as Predictors of Maternal Sensitivity
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INTRODUCTION
Sensitive parenting is associated with a number of desired developmental outcomes in children (Belsky, 1984). Several risk factors have been identified that predict insensitive and other harmful parenting behaviors. These risk factors include experiences in past relationships, experiences of childhood maltreatment, and experiences in current adult relationships.

A mother’s remembered relationships with her own parents are instrumental in predicting maternal parenting behavior and sensitivity in the mother-child relationship (Biringen, 1990; Kovan, Chung, & Stroufe, 2009). Furthermore, the experiences of childhood maltreatment have been associated with adverse effects on the parent-child relationship, such as the transmission of abuse (Belsky, 1993). Lastly, maternal adult relationship experiences often explain the relationship between childhood maltreatment and maternal sensitivity in the context of the parent-child relationship (Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Ickovics, 2004).

METHOD, Continued

Research Aim:
❖ To explore the influence of maternal childhood relationships, childhood maltreatment, and current relationships on maternal sensitivity toward 1 year old infants.

Participants
• 120 women were followed from pregnancy through the first few years of their infants’ life.
• Mothers’ age range: 18-42, M = 26.
• 47% African-American, 36% Caucasian, 13% Biracial, and 4% Other.
• 64% single/never married, 28% married, 4% divorced, and 4% separated.
• 30% are first time mothers.
• 20% have a high school diploma or less, 44% some college or trade school, and 36% college degree.
• Median monthly household income = $1500 (range $0-$10,416).
• 90% have public health insurance, 88% receive services from WIC, 62% receive food stamps, and 20% receive supplemental income.

RESULTS

Measures assessed at T1
Relationships with Parents: The Mother-Father-Peer Scale (MFPS, Epstein, 1983) is a 70 item self-report measure designed to assess mothers’ recalled relationships with their parents. The MFPS consists of subscales regarding maternal and paternal encouragement of independence, maternal and paternal acceptance, maternal and paternal idealization, and peer acceptance. In the larger study, the items regarding acceptance by one’s peers were omitted. In the following analyses, an overall total score of maternal and paternal encouragement of independence and acceptance was used (alpha = .88).

Childhood Trauma: The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein & Fink, 1998) is a 28 item self-report measure designed to assess mothers’ remembered experiences of childhood maltreatment. It consists of five subscales: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect. The total score of all five subscales was used in this study (alpha = .96).

Current Maternal Relationships: The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) is a 36 item self-report measure designed to assess attachment anxiety and avoidance in close relationships. It consists of two subscales: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. The avoidance subscale was used in the present study’s analyses because of its relation to the other variables of interest (alpha = .93).

Measures assessed at T3
Maternal Sensitivity: The short Maternal Behavior Questionnaire (MBQ; Pederson, Moran, & Bento, 1999; Bailey, Biseglia, Roche, Jenkins, & Moran, 2009) is a 25 item observer report designed to assess maternal sensitivity in interactions between a mother and her infant.

METHOD, Continued

Procedures
Pregnant women were recruited through the posting of flyers in pregnancy agencies and community organizations in Southeast Michigan. Data from the first and third waves (pregnancy (T1) and 1 year postpartum (T3)) of the study were examined.

Measures assessed at T1

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DISCUSSION
Results of this study further exemplify the importance of past and current relationship experiences on parenting behavior and the mother-infant relationship. Although the effects of positive recollections of one’s own parents appear to have no relationship with maternal sensitivity in this sample, mothers’ comfort in current relationships moderates the association between childhood maltreatment and sensitivity. More specifically, women who perceive themselves as more comfortable in close relationships, and who view these relationships as important, may experience more negative effects of trauma due to their greater awareness of and investment in relationship experiences, whereas, highly avoidant women may use avoidance to defend against or cope with their traumatic experiences. Therefore, among less avoidant mothers, childhood trauma may result in less sensitive parenting, i.e., experiences as a child may become re-enacted in the current mother-child relationship. This indicates a need for intervention with avoidant mothers and those with difficult past relationship experiences in order to enhance maternal sensitivity toward infants.