Introduction

Parental reflective functioning (RF) refers to a parent’s ability to reflect on his/her own and child’s mental states (Slade, 2005). RF allows an individual to attribute reasonably accurate mental states to others in order to understand their behavior and respond adaptively in interpersonal interactions (Fonagy et al., 1998); this capacity has been shown to have beneficial outcomes for children such as greater attachment security (Slade et al., 2005; Stacks et al., 2014) and a more well-developed understanding of emotions (Slade, 2005). However, a parent’s capacity to be reflective can be undermined during times of emotional arousal and stress (Fonagy & Bateman, 2008).

Exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) has been found to be associated with problematic parenting behaviors (Margolin et al., 2003). Additionally, conflicts in romantic relationships may “spill over” into the parenting realm, resulting in more problematic parenting (Emery et al., 1984).

Thus, it was hypothesized in the present study that exposure to inter-parental conflict during one’s childhood and conflict within current romantic relationship(s) would predict poorer parental RF. Using the framework of the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACEs; Felitti et al., 1998), it was also hypothesized that risky health behaviors would have a significant role in the association between relational conflict and prenatal parenting reflectivity.

Method

Participants

- Age: Mean = 26 yrs; Range = 18-42; SD = 5.7
- Monthly Family Income: Median = $1500
- 73% received services from WIC and 76% had 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. Mothers were interviewed during the third trimester of pregnancy (T1), and at 3 months (T2), 1-, 2-, and 3-years postpartum (T3, T4, and T5, respectively). The current study utilized data from the first wave of data collection.

Measures

- The Working Model of the Child Interview (Zeanah, Benoit, & Barton, 1986) was used at T1 to assess mothers’ mental representations of their children and the parent-child relationship.
  - The Parenting Reflectivity Scale (Rosenblum et al., 2008) was used to code parental RF from the transcribed interviews on a 1-5 scale, with 1 = low or no reflectivity and 5 = high reflectivity. Coding was completed by a team of trained coders (ICCs ranged from .81 - .87).
- The Record of Maltreatment Experiences (ROME-M; Diamond & Muller, 2004) was used to assess childhood exposure to inter-parental interpersonal violence (α = .96).
- The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised Questionnaire (ECR-R; Fraley et al., 2000) was used to assess adult romantic attachment avoidance and anxiety (α = .93 for both).
- The Marital Relationship Scale (MRS; Braiker & Kelley, 1979) was used to assess romantic partner relationship conflict (α = .81).
- The Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Questionnaire (Winters & Zelnman, 1994) was used to assess smoking history (α = .83).

Results

Exposure to relational conflict during childhood, romantic attachment avoidance and anxiety, and current conflict with one’s romantic partner were simultaneously entered as predictors in a multiple regression analysis. Partner conflict was found to significantly, negatively predict parental RF, explaining 5.4% of the variance in maternal reflective capacity (see Table 1). Although significant, the overall model explained a small amount of variance in parental reflectivity.

Table 1. Relational Conflict and Romantic Attachment as Predictors of Parental Reflective Functioning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>se</th>
<th>β</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Childhood Exposure to IPV</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner Conflict</td>
<td>-.02*</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.26*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic Attachment Anxiety</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic Attachment Avoidance</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Adjusted R² = .05

Moderation analyses were conducted via PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) to investigate non-significant associations between indicators of relational conflict and parental RF. Specifically, current health risk indicators including mothers’ lifetime smoking histories were examined as potential moderators.

Discussion

- Current partner conflict was predictive of lower parental RF, an important aspect of parenting known to predict actual parenting behavior.
- Results showing that smoking history (a health risk behavior) moderated the association between childhood exposure to parent conflict and parenting reflectivity, can be understood using the framework of the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACE; Felitti et al., 1998), a public health model that explains adult sequelae from childhood stress & adversity.
- A history of smoking may suggest a maladaptive attempt to cope with unresolved ACEs, negatively affecting parenting reflectivity during critical years of a child’s development.
- Preventative attempts at smoking cessation or cessation of other risky health behaviors may not be successful due to underlying unresolved adversity. Treatment for trauma may increase parental RF.
- The current study was limited by the lack of assessment of all ACEs, e.g., through the ACEs 10-item questionnaire.

Contact Information: Beth L. Jakubowski, B.A., bjakubow@emich.edu

Figure 2. Association between childhood exposure to IPV and parental RF as moderated by history of smoking.