Emotional Availability as a Function of Past Trauma

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Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

- Occurs following the experience or witnessing of life-threatening events
  - Relive the experience through nightmares and flashbacks
  - Anxiety or increased arousal (difficulty sleeping, etc.)
  - Feel numb, detached or estranged
  - Avoidance of things that remind them of event

- 7.8% of Americans will experience PTSD
- Women (10.4%) TWICE as likely as men (5%)
Introduction

- Second-generation effects of trauma
- Theory of Attachment (Ainsworth)
- Linked with the fear system
- Severe conflict when attachment figure is also the source of fear
- Paradox similar to directly threatening parental behavior

(Hesse & Main, 1999)
Emotional Availability

- In a common place setting (no activation of the attachment behavioral system)
- Based on ideas of Attachment Theory, but recast into an emotional framework
- Emphasizes behavioral style rather than discrete behaviors
- Takes reciprocal relationship into account

(Biringen, et al., 1994)
Two Novel Questions

- What is the quality of the commonplace interaction between mothers with past trauma and their children?
- How are mothers with diagnosed PTSD going to rate compared to mothers with past trauma without diagnosis?
Method

- Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV (SCID)
- Classify 3 groups:
  - controls
  - mothers with past trauma history
  - PTSD diagnosis
- Videotape 10 minute play interaction between mother and 4-month old
- Code videos for Emotional Availability
Participants

- 40 Dyads: 10 PTSD, 10 trauma and 20 controls
- Mothers ages 18-40 and 4-month old children
- Drawn from sample of mothers in prenatal depression research study
- Matched trauma victims with controls for age and socio-economic status
Setting…
Emotional Availability Coding

Five Scales:
- Parental Sensitivity
- Parental Structuring
- Parental Non-intrusiveness
- Parental Non-hostility
- Child Responsiveness to Parent
Results

- Sensitivity
- Structuring
- Non-Intrusiveness
- Non-Hostility
- Child Responsiveness

Legend:
- PTSD
- Past Trauma
- Controls
PTSD v. Controls

- **Sensitivity:**
  - $p = .002$
  - PTSD moms' sensitivity is significantly lower than control moms

- **Structuring:**
  - $p = .006$
  - PTSD moms' structuring is significantly lower than control moms
Results

- Sensitivity
- Structuring
- Non-Intrusiveness
- Non-Hostility
- Child Responsiveness

Legend:
- PTSD
- Past Trauma
- Controls
More on Results…

- PTSD moms are less warm and emotionally connected to child
- They have less appropriate and authentic affect
- They are less able to facilitate a child’s play
- BUT this is not because of hostility or intrusiveness
- Sporadically alarming the infant?
Discussion

- Mother preoccupied with her own trauma
- Less emotionally available to child
- Child is then responding less optimally

Pick up on affective state → Feel rejected & detached/ Feel less support from parent → Impulse AWAY from caregiver
Alternate Explanation

- Depression?
  - Low energy and affect has been found in depressed moms
  - 6 of 10 PTSD moms in study co-morbid for depression
  - All moms with trauma experience had no diagnosis of any kind

➢ Depression could be the contributing factor!
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The End

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