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**Parental Stress and Relational Quality in the Parent-Child Dyad**

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**Pace University**

**A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of  
Doctor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology at Pace University**

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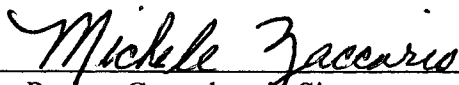
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xi
ABSTRACT	xiii
1. Chapter I – Introduction	1
2. Chapter II – Literature Review	6
<i>Models of parenting</i>	6
<i>Adaptive parenting</i>	10
<i>Adaptive parenting and child social and communicative ability</i>	12
<i>Attachment</i>	18
<i>Parenting behavior and attachment</i>	21
<i>Different types of stress and their effects</i>	22
<i>Parenting Stress</i>	23
<i>Life Stress</i>	24
<i>Event Stress</i>	24
<i>Parental depression and parenting</i>	25

<i>Depression and stress</i>	25
<i>Stress and parenting</i>	26
<i>Stress and parental attitudes</i>	28
<i>Neuropsychological effects of stress</i>	29
<i>Threshold theory of stress</i>	30
<i>Stress and attachment</i>	31
<i>Parental stress, depression, and child development and outcomes</i>	32
<i>Method of transmission</i>	35
<i>Moderators of stress on parenting behavior</i>	38
<i>Approaches to observational relational assessment</i>	39
<i>Statement of Purpose</i>	41
<i>Hypotheses</i>	42
<b>3. Chapter III – Methods</b>	44
<i>Participants</i>	44
<i>Materials</i>	44
<i>Social Readjustment Rating Scale-Revised</i>	45
<i>Impact of Events Scale-Revised</i>	48
<i>Parenting Stress Index-Short Form</i>	49
<i>Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support</i>	51
<i>Parent-Child Early Relational Assessment</i>	52
<i>Procedure</i>	60

4. Chapter IV – Results	63
<i>Data Analyses</i>	63
<i>Hypothesis 1</i>	63
<i>Hypothesis 2</i>	69
<i>Hypothesis 3</i>	72
<i>Hypothesis 4</i>	76
<i>Research Question 1</i>	80
<i>Research Question 2</i>	85
<i>Research Question 3</i>	85
<i>Posthoc Analyses</i>	86
5. Chapter V – Discussion	103
<i>Findings and Implications</i>	103
<i>Differential impact of stress on the</i>	
<i>relational quality of the parent-child dyad</i>	103
<i>Social Support</i>	110
<i>Child gender</i>	113
<i>Parent employment and family income</i>	113
<i>The relevance of context</i>	116
<i>Limitations</i>	118
<i>Directions for Future Research</i>	121
<i>Conclusions</i>	123
6. References	128
7. Appendices	153

<i>A. Definitions of the PCERA variables taken from the PCERA manual</i>	153
<i>B. Subject Recruitment Flyer</i>	159
<i>C. Consent Forms</i>	160
<i>D. Demographics Questionnaire</i>	163
<i>E. Descriptive Statistics for Stress Measures and Social Support</i>	166
<i>F. Descriptive Statistics for PCERA variables – Structured Play</i>	167
<i>G. Descriptive Statistics for PCERA variables – Free Play</i>	168

## LIST OF TABLES

### Table

1. <i>Sample Demographic Information</i>	46
2. <i>Parent-Child Early Relational Assessment (PCERA) Subscales</i>	53
3. <i>Selected PCERA Variables and Correlations with Subscales</i>	54
4. <i>Interrater Reliability Coefficients by Participant</i>	57
5. <i>Interrater Reliability Coefficients by Variable in Structured Play</i>	58
6. <i>Interrater Reliability Coefficients by Variable in Free Play</i>	58
7. <i>Correlations Between Stress Measures</i>	64
8. <i>Correlations Between Stress Measures When Controlling for Social Support</i>	64
9. <i>Correlations Between Stress Measures and PCERA Variables in Free Play</i>	65
10. <i>Correlations Between Stress Measures and ERA Variables in Structured Play</i>	66
11. <i>Correlations Between Overall Social Support and PCERA Variables in Free and Structured Play</i>	78
12. <i>Significant Interactions of Stress and Social Support on PCERA Variables in Free Play</i>	82
13. <i>Significant Interactions of Stress and Social Support on PCERA Variables in Structured Play</i>	83
14. <i>Correlations Between Stress and Social Support</i>	84



15. Significant Interactions of Total Stress Composite (PSI-SF/SRRS-R/IES-R) and Social Support on PCERA Variables in Free and Structured Play	97
16. Significant Interactions of SRRS-R/PSI-SF Composite and Social Support on PCERA Variables in Free and Structured Play	98
17. Significant Interactions of SRRS-R/IES-R Composite and Social Support on PCERA Variables in Free and Structured Play	99
18. Significant Interactions of PSI-SF/IES-R Composite and Social Support on PCERA Variables in Free and Structured Play	100

## LIST OF FIGURES

### Figure

1. *The relationship between Child Communicative Competence and life stress moderated by social support in structured play* 86
2. *The relationship between Readability and life stress moderated by social support in structured play* 87
3. *The relationship between Flat, Empty, Constricted and life stress moderated by social support in structured play* 88
4. *The relationship between Readability and event stress moderated by social support in structured play* 88
5. *The relationship between Readability and parenting stress moderated by social support in structured play* 89
6. *The relationship between Flat, Empty, Constricted and parenting stress moderated by social support in structured play* 89
7. *The relationship between Tension, Anxiety and parenting stress moderated by social support in structured play* 90
8. *The relationship between Connectedness and life stress moderated by social support in free play* 90

9. <i>The relationship between Child Social Behavior- Initiates and life stress moderated by social support in free play</i>	91
10. <i>The relationship between Focus on Parent's Emotional State and life stress moderated by social support in free play</i>	91
11. <i>The relationship between Child Communicative Competence and life stress moderated by social support in free play</i>	92
12. <i>The relationship between Readability and life stress moderated by social support in free play</i>	92
13. <i>The relationship between Readability and life stress moderated by social support in free play</i>	93
14. <i>The relationship between State Similarity and life stress moderated by social support in free play</i>	93
15. <i>The relationship between Joint Attention and life stress moderated by social support in free play</i>	94

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## ABSTRACT

Parental stress and its relationship to parenting and parent-child interactions is a highly researched area. However, existing research has several limitations. Of particular interest is the lack of differentiation between various types of stresses that parents experience, and the different associations of different stresses on parental behavior and the dyadic relationship. The current study, using 26 parent-child dyads, studies the differential relationship of parenting, life, and event stress on parent-child relational quality in a community sample. Parent-child behavior and relational quality were assessed using the Parent-Child Early Relational Assessment (PCERA) (Clark, 1985). Additionally, the moderational influence of social support was evaluated. Problems achieving adequate reliability suggest difficulties with the application of the PCERA to a community sample. Results indicated a lack of linearity with respect to the correspondence between parent behavior, child characteristics, and dyadic relational quality. Instead, results support a complex model of stress, in which the particular type of stress affects particular parent-child interaction patterns in different ways. The moderational impact of social support followed a similar pattern, but was most strongly related to the presence of parental life stress. Implications for a more nuanced understanding of parent-child dyadic behavior are proposed.

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Empirical research has documented and consistently supported a link between parent stress and parenting. High parental stress levels are generally associated with negative parenting in terms of sensitivity, affect, and behavior (Coyl, Roggman, & Newland, 2002; Pajulo et al., 2001). Research indicates that parents with higher stress levels are less responsive, warm, engaged, and display less affect. Additionally, they exhibit more anger, control of child behavior, criticism, rejecting behaviors, and preoccupation. They have greater difficulty appropriately recognizing and responding to their children's cues, and high-risk parents were also significantly more apt to have confirmed maltreatment reports against them (Crnic et al., 1983; Pajulo et al., 2001; Tein, Sandler, & Zautra, 2000; Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1988; Coyl et al., 2002; Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996; Kotch et al., 1997).

Parental stress levels are also associated with the quality of dyadic interactions as well as child developmental and mental health outcomes (Crnic, Greenberg, Ragozin, Robinson, & Basham, 1983; Magill-Evans & Harrison, 2001). Fonagy (2001) notes that exposure to maternal depression, marital disharmony and deficits in maternal social support compromises the child's attachment security. Another meta-analytic review found attachment security to be significantly related to stress in addition to social/marital support and depression (Atkinson, Paglia, Coolbear, Niccols, Parker, & Guger, 2000). In

addition to being less securely attached, children of stressed mothers are less responsive to their mothers' actions, provide less clear signals regarding their experience, are less enthusiastic and persistent, and are described by their mothers as having more attention and behavioral problems (Abidin, Jenkins, & McGaughey, 1992; Crnic et al., 1983; Pianta & Egeland, 1990).

While the literature is replete with studies focusing on the interplay of the constructs of stress, depression, attachment, parenting, and child outcomes, several important factors limit the utility and generalizability of the existing information. First, the construct of stress is ill defined. Various researchers use the term "stress" to indicate varying types and degrees of stressful experiences, resulting in an undifferentiated body of evidence suggesting associations between "stress" and other constructs. Similarly, parenting stress, namely the stress specifically associated with the parenting role, is often used to capture the stress of parents. While parenting stress is obviously an important aspect of the global level of stress that parents experience, it is by no means the exclusive type of stress that parents report. Daily hassles, financial and economic difficulties, marital troubles, and stressful major life events are among the other kinds of stressors experienced by parents. These also contribute to parents' assessment of their own stress as well as their level of functioning. Although the existing stress literature in the parent-child arena primarily involves parenting stress, and attempts to generalize to other kinds of stress, it seems likely that dissimilar types of stress may differentially correspond to a parent's manner of functioning, as well as to parenting ability (i.e., . Sossin & Birklein, 2006). Similarly, Rogers (1993) suggested that parenting stress, as opposed to more generic forms of stress, might be most directly associated with disturbances in parenting



behavior. Deater-Deckard (1998) indicated that life stress is “role specific” and different forms of stress may predict distinct outcomes in parenting, dyadic interaction, and child adjustment depending upon the specific nature of the stressor. The generalization of parenting stress to other types of parental stresses likely overlooks differences in the impact of different kinds of stresses on parenting behavior and the dyadic interaction.

Adams (2006), investigating the same data set, albeit with different behavioral classifications differing from the current study, found that a sub-clinical level of event stress was positively associated with the affective quality of parenting behavior. Her findings support the conclusion that the model of stress is not a linear one; rather, the association between stress and parenting is curvilinear and corresponds to the degree of stress present in a particular sample. The current study, while using the same sample as that of Adams’ study, focuses on the relational quality present in the parent-child interaction, as well as the relational characteristics of parent and child behavior. While parenting theorists used to assume that the conduit of the transmission of parental stress to impact child social and emotional deficits, emerging literature indicates that it was not observable behavior that “transmitted” stress. Both Crnic, Gaze, and Hoffman (2005) and Anthony et al. (2005) did not find evidence supporting parenting behavior as the mediator of stress and children’s outcome. Seemingly, parenting behavior may not be the mediator that theorists and researchers have assumed it to be. Therefore, the question of what mediates the strong relationship between parental stress and children’s outcomes looms large (Deater-Deckard, 2005). Beatrice Beebe, along with other infant researchers (i.e., Beebe et al., 2000) have begun to focus on the minutia of the parent-child interaction, and in particular, the nonverbal indices of relational quality and attachment. Similarly, Sossin

and Birklein (2006), along with other movement researchers, continue to focus on the nonverbal movement and transmission of emotionally-laden information. It seems clear that current researchers recognize that the method of transmission of information, including stress, between parent and child exists in the space between the two partners of the dyad. However, the question remains whether this transfer of information is discernable and open to measurement.

Research indicates that the relationship between stress and negative parenting behaviors may be moderated by variables such as: parental coping, level of self-esteem/self efficacy, and cognitive appraisal. Of the potential moderators, social support has been the most frequently examined in the stress literature and a number of studies have acknowledged its buffering influence (Crnic et al, 1983; Crnic, Greenberg and Slough, 1986; Kotch et al, 1997; Parks et al, 1992; Rogers, 1993; Adams, 2006). These buffering influences further complicate the association between stress, parenting behaviors, dyadic interactions, and children's outcomes.

The current study attempts to elucidate the potential differential correspondances between various types of parent-experienced stress and the relational quality of the parent-child dyad in a nonclinical sample. By utilizing separate measures to evaluate the presence of life, event, and parenting stress, the current study attempts to distinguish types of stress parents experience. Observed interactions, using relational and dyadic variables taken from the Parent- Child Early Relational Assessment (PCERA) were coded for videotapes of 26 parent-child dyads. Additionally, the correspondance between social support and parent and child behavior, as well as dyadic interaction, and its role as a moderator is examined. It is hypothesized that, based on current literature, parent, child,

and dyadic behavior would be negatively associated with each of the three types of stress evaluated. It is also predicted that social support will be negatively correlated with perceived parental stress and positively correlated with the quality of parent, child and dyadic behavior. Moreover, social support is expected to moderate the relationship between stress and parenting behaviors and dyadic interactions. Additionally, several exploratory questions relating to the demographics of the sample i.e., the role that the gender of the child, the employment situation of the parents, and the family's income (i.e., above/ below \$65,000) play in terms of perceived parental stress levels as well as PCERA variables are examined.

PREVIEW

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

The correspondence between high levels of stress and increased psychological distress, health problems, and overall psychological functioning has been well documented (e.g., Cropley & Steptoe, 2005; Mulvihill, 2005). It follows, then, that high levels of stress would likely also be related to one's social behavior, including parenting. Research in this area indicates that, in fact, higher stress levels predict negative parenting behaviors (Crnic et al., 1983; Kotch, Browne, Ringwalt, Dufort, & Ruina, 1997; Tein, Sandler, & Zautra, 2000; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). For example, Rogers (1993) found that stressed parents demonstrated poorer parenting techniques, such as increased punishment, inconsistency, parental coldness, sensitization and rejection-directed behavior.

*Models of parenting.* Many theorists posit a multi-determinant model of parenting, in which several factors interact to influence parenting behavior. One such theorist is Belsky (1984), who proposed that parenting is determined by three factors: (1) the parent's personality and psychological resources, (2) the child's individual characteristics, and (3) contextual sources of stress and social support. Thus, factors such as marital relationships, social networks and financial resources, likely impact parenting. It follows, then, that Belsky posited a positive relationship between good parenting and social support. Belsky's model was tested by Rogers (1993) who found that stressed

parents demonstrated poorer parenting techniques, such as punishment, inconsistency, parental coldness, sensitization and rejection-directed behavior, as well as overall greater symptomatology. According to Belsky's model, the interaction between stress and a parent's emotional resources apparently influences his or her ability to parent adaptively. At the same time, the presence of social support would moderate the adverse affect of stress on parenting.

Mowder (2005) proposed the Parent Development Theory (PDT), another model of parenting. Mowder notes that the schema of a "parent" develops slowly over time, beginning in childhood, and is affected by experiences of parental figures, other relationships, and life events (Mowder, 1993). Furthermore, the primary six parental role characteristics (i.e., bonding, discipline, education, general welfare, responsivity, and sensitivity) fluctuate in accordance with the parent's perceived role as well as with the particular needs of the child. From this perspective, parental stress would impact an individual's schemata about parenting and the parent's specific role.

Beebe, Jaffe and Lachmann (2005) have applied Bloom's (1983) theory of communication to the parent- infant dyad. Bloom (1983) noted that communication can be the transmission of verbal material, or it can be "a framing of the interaction- a 'getting into sync'- that involves a process in which persons act in ways that are responsive to the actions of those with whom they are in communication" (p. 84). Thus, in face-to-face interaction, communication occurs on several different levels, as information is transmitted verbally and nonverbally between two ever-changing partners (Beebe et al., 2005).

Empirical research has supported the idea of a mutually-regulated system-based approach to dyadic interaction. Cappella (1991, as quoted in Beebe et al., 2005) used a “round robin” approach, in which eight adults interacted with each of the others, to evaluate the coordination of vocal timing in adults. He demonstrated that, while there was little consistency within individuals, high consistency was found within dyads. That is, each dyad developed a match of responsivity that was specific to that interaction and that was not easily predictable based on the individual’s characteristics alone. This suggests that individuals do not have a generalized level of responsiveness that they bring to all interactions. Rather, a new system of responsiveness and interaction is created by each dyadic couple that is unreplicated in interactions one has with different dyadic partners.

Beebe and colleagues (1994, 2005) have discussed this notion of a mutually-regulated dyadic interaction and its application to parent- child interaction and observation. These authors have proposed a theoretical model for understanding the communicative pattern of the dyad. The model initially proposed by Beebe and Lachmann (1994) and then expanded upon by Beebe et al. (2005) suggests that the two partners should not be studied as isolated individuals, one of whom provides a “stimulus” and the other a “response” (Condon & Sander, 1974), but rather should be seen as a complex system of shared movements, rhythms, and affects (Beebe et al., 2005). While the parent’s capacities for control, volition, and flexibility are obviously greater than that of the child, each partner’s behavior is predictable from the behavior of the other (Beebe et al., 2005).

Beebe and Lachmann (1994) identify three integrated principles, “ongoing relations,” “disruption and repair,” and “heightened affective moments,” to explain how

social interactions between caretaker and child become patterned, expected and salient. Through these interactions, the child develops internalized representations of relationships and of the social world. These representations are eventually generalized to other social situations, and guide what the child expects, anticipates and predicts about social interaction and the consequences of behavior.

The fundamental principle of “ongoing relations,” which refers to “those characteristic, predictable and expected ways in which an interaction unfolds” (Beebe & Lachmann, 1994 p. 133), reflects the shared dyadic “rules” that develop over time. An optimal interactive pattern is characterized by the fact that each partner’s communicative and regulatory behavior responds and conforms to the expectations of the other partner. Therefore, Beebe and Lachmann propose that the degree of parental conformity to the child’s expectations and needs will affect the child’s capacity for memory, emotions, attention and capacity to learn. The second principle proposed by Beebe and Lachmann is “disruption and repair,” which address the manner in which disturbances to the expected patterns are repaired. The third principle of “heightened affective moments,” posits that percepts and memories can be organized by matching prototypes of affective experiences with similar emotional situations.

Beebe and Lachmann (1994) and Beebe et al. (2005) suggest that these principles generate a set of dyadic “rules” that, in turn, form the basis of the child’s expectations for the environment and for social relationships. The patterned interactions between parent and child are integrated into the child’s psyche, and are concretized as an “object relation” (Beebe et al., 2005). In this sense, what is internalized is not the object per se, but the schema of being with another, and of the representations of the self and the other

in relation to each other (Beebe et al., 2005; Beebe & Stern, 1977). Thus, a disturbance in consistent, contingent parenting, as may be caused by excessive parental stress, can disrupt the mutually-regulated dyadic system, and may negatively affect a child's ability to develop adaptive schemas about the social world. The idea that parent-child interactions are co-constructed and dynamic has implication for the treatment of at-risk or misaligned dyads.

*Adaptive parenting.* When examining parent-child interactions and parenting behavior, the difference between adaptive and problematic parenting practices must be fully understood. To this end, researchers have scrutinized dyadic interactions and have proposed several theoretical conceptualizations. These formulations provide a framework within which it is possible to evaluate specific parenting behaviors and methods of interaction.

Reciprocity, as defined by Osófsky and Thompson (2000), involves the communication of "shared or complementary affects and experiences" (p. 55), and is generally associated with positive parenting behavior. Another factor in the development of a mutually satisfying dyadic interaction is "affect attunement," or a parent's ability to match and empathize with an infant's affective state (Stern, 1984). This sharing increases reciprocity. Stern (1994) argues that early interactions between parent and infant provide the child with moments of "being-with-another-in-a-certain-way" (p.10), including the feelings, thought, actions and perceptions involved in that experience. These moments of "being-with-another-in-a-certain-way" forms the foundation for various interpersonal and social schemata that Stern refers to as "schema-of-being-with" others (p. 12).