

Gender Differences between Mothers and Fathers in Exposure and Reactivity to Parenting Stressors

NaBria L. Beasley and Kelly E. Cichy

Kent State University, Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program

ABSTRACT

This study examined gender differences between mothers and fathers in exposure to parenting stressors. To examine parental gender differences between mothers and fathers in exposure to parenting stressors we used a t-test. This study also examined reactivity to parenting stressors by examining associations between parents' parenting stressors and their health and well-being. To examine the correlations between parents' gender, age, marital status, parenting stressors, daily negative affect, and physical symptoms we used regression analyses. Participants included individuals who identified as parents ($N=1,118$) from the Midlife in the United States Survey (MIDUS II) and the National Study of Daily Experiences (NSDE II). Participants ages ranged from 33 to 84 years old. Respondents self-reported their physical health and mental/emotional health, marital status, and number of children. For a series of eight days, respondents also reported on the stressors they experienced that involved their children (i.e., parenting stressors) as well as their negative affect and physical health symptoms. Findings revealed gender differences between mothers and fathers in exposure to parenting stressors, where mothers reported more parenting stressors than did fathers. Associations between parenting stressors and negative affect were greater for mothers than for fathers who experienced high parenting stressors, suggesting mothers may be particularly vulnerable to experiencing and reacting to parenting stressors.

INTRODUCTION

The Daily Stress Process

- **Parenting stressors** are the routine challenges of day-to-day family life that occur frequently and disrupt daily life and involve the respondent's child (e.g. argument with child, sick child; Almeida, 2005).
- **Exposure** likelihood of experiencing a stressor (Almeida, 2005)
- **Reactivity** psychological or physical response to the stressor (Almeida, 2005)

Literature Review

Gender Differences in the Daily Stress Process

- Women tend to have more opportunities to experience stress because of something known as the "second shift" (Hochschild & Machung, 2012).
- With the "second shift", women work full or part-time jobs and still come home and take care of the house in a lot of cases.
- The "second shift" is likely to expose women to more parenting stressors and to exhaust the resources that mothers have to cope with parenting stressors when they occur (Almeida, 2005; Hochschild & Machung, 2012).

Demographic Variability in Reactivity to Parenting Stressors

Age

- Older mothers are thought to have less stress because of the fact they established their relationship with authority and are a little more confident in themselves (Lewin, Mitchell, & Ronzio, 2013).

Marital Status

- Married couples are expected to have fewer parenting stressors because unlike their unmarried counterparts they have a committed individual to co-parent with, which may help lessen stressors (Cunningham & Knoester, 2007).

OBJECTIVES

- To examine gender differences between mothers and fathers in exposure to parenting stressors. I hypothesize that mothers will experience more parenting stressors than fathers because of mothers spending more time around children.
- To examine reactivity to parenting stressors by examining associations between parents' parenting stressors and their health and well-being (i.e., negative affect, physical symptoms). I hypothesize that those who experience more parenting stressors will also report higher negative affect and more physical health symptoms.
- To examine how demographic characteristics (i.e., age, gender, and marital status) moderate associations between parenting stressors, health and well-being. I hypothesize that associations between parenting stressors, health, and well-being will be greater for those who are younger, female, and unmarried.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were from the National Study of Daily Experiences (NSDE II), part of the larger Midlife in the United States (MIDUS II) sample. Participants in this study were all parents (Total $N = 1,118$).
- Adults aged 33-84 years ($M = 58.0$, $SD = 12.4$).
- Sample characteristics:
 - 58.4% female
 - Mothers and fathers are from different families
 - 5.3% have less than a high school diploma
 - 49.6% have high school diploma/some college
 - 31.5% have college degree/some graduate school
 - 13.6% have an advanced degree
 - 77% are married
 - Average number of children ($M = 2.95$, $SD=1.6$, 1-12)

METHODS

Procedure

MIDUS (Midlife in the United States)

- Filled out questionnaires and completed phone interviews

NSDE II (National Study of Daily Experiences)

- Participated in 8 days of diary interviews
- Reported on the stressors they experienced across the days
- Reported on their negative affect and physical health symptoms

Measures

Parenting Stressors

- Stressful experiences which involved the respondent's child

METHODS (cont.)

Measures

Average Negative Affect

- Non-Specific Psychological Distress Scale & PANAS (Kessler et al., 2002; Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988)
- 14-items
- 4-point response scale from 0 (*none at all*) to 3 (*very*)
- Example items: worthless, hopeless
- Negative affect $\alpha = .91$

Average Number of Physical Symptoms

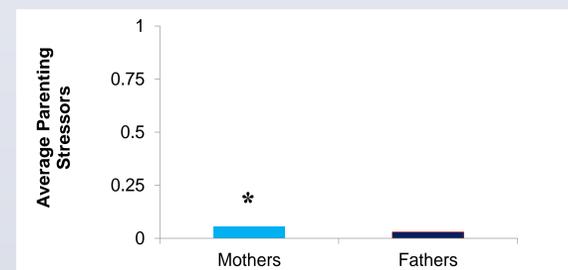
- 25 physical symptoms (e.g., nausea, headache, cough)
- Sum of the number of daily physical symptoms

RESULTS

- **Parenting Stressor Exposure:** T-Test

Gender Differences in Exposure to Parenting Stressors

Mothers Reported More Parenting Stressors Compared to Fathers

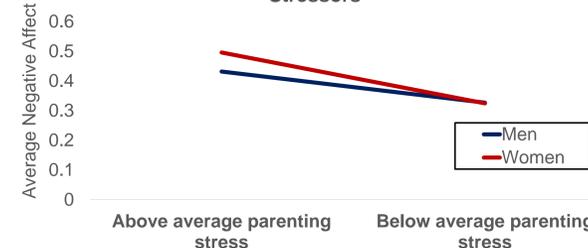


T-test results: $t(1007) = 2.98$, $p < .01$

- **Parenting Stressor Reactivity:** Stepwise regression

Gender and Reactivity to Parenting Stressors

Mothers with High Parenting Stressors Report Higher NA than Fathers with High Parenting Stressors



DISCUSSION

Gender Differences in Exposure and Reactivity to Parenting Stressors

- Findings suggest that mothers may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of parenting stressors when they experience more parenting stressors.
- It is possible that marital status did not moderate reactivity because most of our respondents were married, so there was less variability in marital status.
- Findings suggest that older parents may not experience as much stress because they have a little more experience with stress than younger parents.
- Older parents are also not actively involved in childrearing activities because their children are young or middle-aged adults, which may decrease their reactivity to parenting stressors.
- These findings are important because they help with targeting solutions for reducing stress among parents.

LIMITATIONS

- Many respondents were in midlife & later life, so they may not be actively involved in childrearing activities
- Mothers and fathers are from different families
- Who's living in the household (e.g., adult children moved out or child & adolescent in the home)

FUTURE DIRECTION

- Include child's perspective
- Include parents from the same family
- Consider the division of household labor in the family
- Examine day-to-day within person variability in exposure and reactivity to parenting stressors
- To examine whether co-residence and child's age moderate the associations between parenting stressors and health and well-being

REFERENCES

- Almeida, D. M. (2005). Resilience and vulnerability to daily stressors assessed via diary methods. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14, 64-68.
- Cunningham, A., & Knoester, C., (2007). Marital status, gender, and parents' psychological well-being. *Sociological Inquiry*, 77, 264-287.
- Hochschild, A., & Machung, A., (2012). *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*. New York, NY: Penguin Books
- Lewin, A., Mitchell, S., & Ronzio, C., (2013). Developmental differences in parenting behavior: Comparing adolescent, emerging adult, and adult mothers. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 59, 23-49.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Supported by NIH Grants P01 AG0210166-02, R01 AG19239, T32 MH018904 and the Network on Successful Mid-Life Development of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation