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Risk and resilience: understanding the relationship between social disadvantage, maternal distress, and infant temperament

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Keywords

Maternal distress, social disadvantage, infant temperament, socioeconomic status, depression, anxiety,

Abstract

Background: Maternal distress is an influential factor for fetal development, including infant temperament. Infant temperament is important as a potential precursor for the development of child psychopathology. It is important to consider the psychosocial influences and context as it relates to maternal distress, particularly social disadvantage. Although the association of social disadvantage with maternal distress is documented, questions remain about the mechanisms through which risk factors (socioeconomic status area deprivation, subjective social status, perceived discrimination) influence distress and indirectly may influence offspring temperamental development

Methods: Data was collected from volunteers as part of the Prenatal Environment and Child Health study (PEACH) at Oregon Health & Science University (n=304). Measures of maternal distress, objective and subjective socioeconomic status, area deprivation (a geospatial index with information about neighborhood disadvantage), self-reported discrimination, in the pre- and post-natal period, and parent-reported infant negative affectivity at 6 months were used.

Results: Subjective social status predicted maternal distress in the prenatal and postnatal period ($\beta=-.25$, $p<.01$, $\beta=-.25$ $<.01$). The area disadvantage index predicted negative affect at 6 months infant age ($\beta=-.25$, $p<.05$). Postnatal maternal distress predicted infant negative affect at 6 months infant age when controlling for prenatal maternal distress ($\beta=-.34$, $p<.01$). Postnatal maternal distress partially mediated the relationship between subjective social status and negative affect at 6-month infant age ($\beta=-.08$, $p<.05$). In a subsample that completed the Everyday Discrimination Scale, self-reported discrimination predicted with postnatal maternal distress ($\beta=.27$, $p<.05$), while area deprivation predicted self-reported discrimination ($\beta=.23$, $p<.05$).

Conclusion: The findings of this study emphasize the importance of understanding the determinants of maternal distress, particularly the role played by social status and discrimination. Given that postnatal maternal distress and area disadvantage predicted infant temperament at 6 months, approaches to dampening the effects of distress and disadvantage should be considered.