

The Relationship of Parenting Style and Conflict to Maternal Well-Being
in Single and Married Mothers of School-Aged Children

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Abstract

In a middle income, predominantly white sample of 373 married mothers and 33 single mothers, measures of mothers' depression and anxiety were regressed longitudinally on measures of mothers' encouragement of their childrens' independence and autonomy as well as on measures of the affective quality of the mother-child relationship. Mothers' reports of their childrens' autonomy emerged as a significant predictor of depression and anxiety in single mothers; this relationship was nonsignificant in married mothers. The affective quality of the relationship between mothers and their children was not a significant predictor of depression and anxiety in either single or married mothers. Furthermore, child's gender was not significant in predicting depression and anxiety in mothers. Findings were discussed in terms of differential mental health consequences for single and married mothers based on parenting style.

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Introduction

The purpose of the present investigation is to predict parental well-being in mothers as a function of parenting style and the affective quality of the mother-child relationship. Specifically, this study examines the relationship between depression and anxiety in mothers and the amount of conflict and emotional closeness reported by mothers between themselves and their school-aged children, as well as the relationship between maternal depression and anxiety and the amount of autonomy that mothers encourage in their school-age children.

Research related to parenting style (Eccles, et al, 1991) has examined this question developmentally in terms of person-environment fit theory. Person-environment fit theory states that optimal developmental outcomes ought to result from an environment that gradually reduces adult control as children's desire for autonomy increases. Presumably, these optimal developmental outcomes for children will be reflected in better parent-child relationships and, in turn, in better mental health outcomes for parents. This component of the parent-child relationship ought to be especially important in the present sample as the school-aged children approach adolescence.

Previous research on the affective nature of parent-child relationships (e.g. Silverberg & Steinberg, 1987; Steinberg, 1981) has stressed parent-adolescent relationships, revealing largely negative changes in the relationship associated with the child's transition to adolescence and puberty. Few studies, however have been done on the parental well-being of mothers with children in grade school. Research on this stage of the parent-child relationship may provide valuable insights into the differences in family relationships in the absence of potentially more disruptive changes associated with the transition to adolescence.

Based on previous research, we predict that increased amounts of conflict and decreased emotional closeness between mothers and their children will be related to increased amounts of maternal depression and anxiety. Additionally, we predict that the developmentally appropriate encouragement of childrens' autonomy, controlling for the affective quality of the parent-child relationship, will be related to decreased amounts of depression and anxiety in mothers. We also examined differences in these relationships based on the marital status of the mother (single versus married) and on the gender of her child.

Methods

This study is part of a larger investigation being conducted at the University of Michigan (Elementary School Years Study). These data represent responses from 373 married mothers and 33 single mothers from the third and fourth waves of a four year study. Subjects were recruited from twelve school districts located in predominantly White, low- to middle-income communities in Southeastern Michigan. Subjects' children were in fourth grade at wave three and in fifth grade at wave four.

Sample Items From Scales

Parent Depression and Anxiety

I find myself anxious and worrying

I am depressed

I like myself (reverse coded)

1=never

7=almost every day

Scale included seven items: Chronbach alpha=.81

Parent-Child Affective Relationship

There is a great deal of conflict between this child and me

I am emotionally close to this child (reverse coded)

1=not at all true

7=very true

Scale included five items: Chronbach alpha=.76

Parent Encouragement of Autonomy

I encourage this child to be curious; to explore his or her environment

I encourage this child to be independent of me

I give this child a good many duties and responsibilities

1=not at all true

7=very true

Scale included three items: Chronbach alpha=.52

Results

Overview of Analyses

All predictions were tested using regression analyses. Measures of depression and anxiety in mothers at Time 2 were regressed onto measures of child's autonomy and the affective quality of the mother-child relationship at Time 1. The regression analyses also controlled for mothers' depression & anxiety at Time 1, allowing us to examine change in these measures over time. Finally, the regression analyses included child gender and marital status of the mother as predictors, as well as the interactions of marital status X child autonomy and the interaction of marital status X mothers' depression & anxiety.

Results in Terms of Marital Status

While marital status did not by itself predict depression and anxiety, the interaction between marital status and child autonomy was significant (See Graph) such that for married mothers, there was no significant relationship between child autonomy and depression and anxiety; yet for single mothers, increases in children's autonomy predicted to an *increase* in measures of depression and anxiety ($p < .028$, $rsq. = .01$)

Results in Terms of Child Gender

The interaction between child gender and amount of autonomy was explored in single mothers. The interaction of child gender with autonomy was not a significant predictor of depression and anxiety in single mothers. However, selecting out the single mothers with boys from the single mothers with girls and running separate regression analyses yields some significant results (See Graph). There is a significantly positive relationship between boys' autonomy and single mothers' depression and anxiety; the same relationship between single mothers and their daughters is nonsignificant. However, even though the relationship for boys is significantly different from 0 while the relationship for girls is not, we are not able to conclude that these two relationships are statistically significantly different from each other.

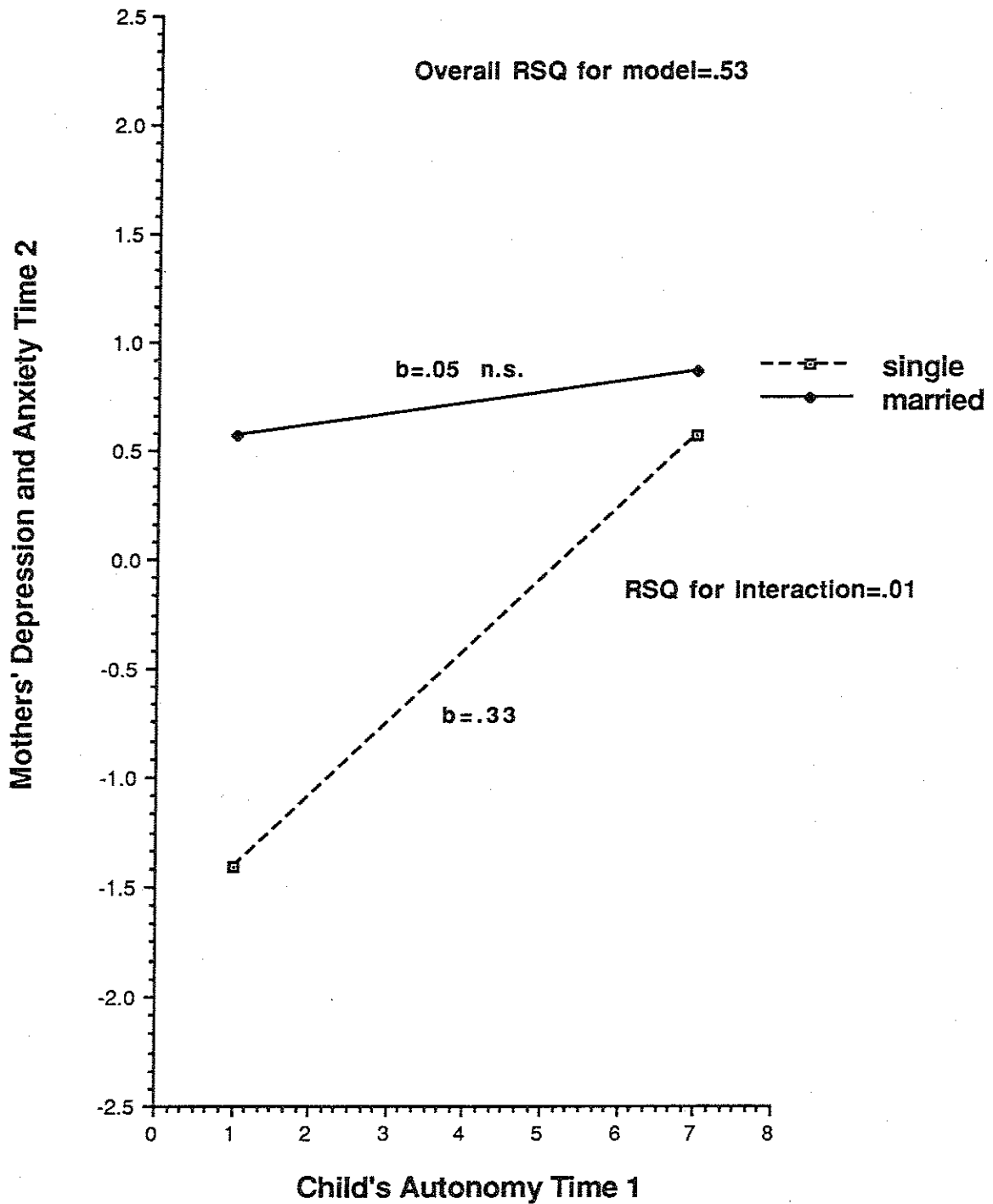
Discussion

Interestingly, the affective quality of the relationship between mothers and their children was not predictive of change in maternal depression and anxiety. It is possible that conflict (or lack thereof) between mothers and their children is not a salient aspect of the parent-child relationship for school-aged children and their mothers, even though previous research has indicated that conflict is a critical component of the relationship between adolescents and their mothers in predicting parental well-being.

Surprisingly, even when controlling for the affective quality of the mother-child relationship, the structural component of mothers' encouragement of autonomy and independence did not yield the expected results. This relationship was non-significant for married mothers, but in single mothers the results were in the opposite direction expected. In single mothers, it appears that encouraging autonomy and independence in their children predicts to an increase over time in amounts of maternal depression and anxiety.

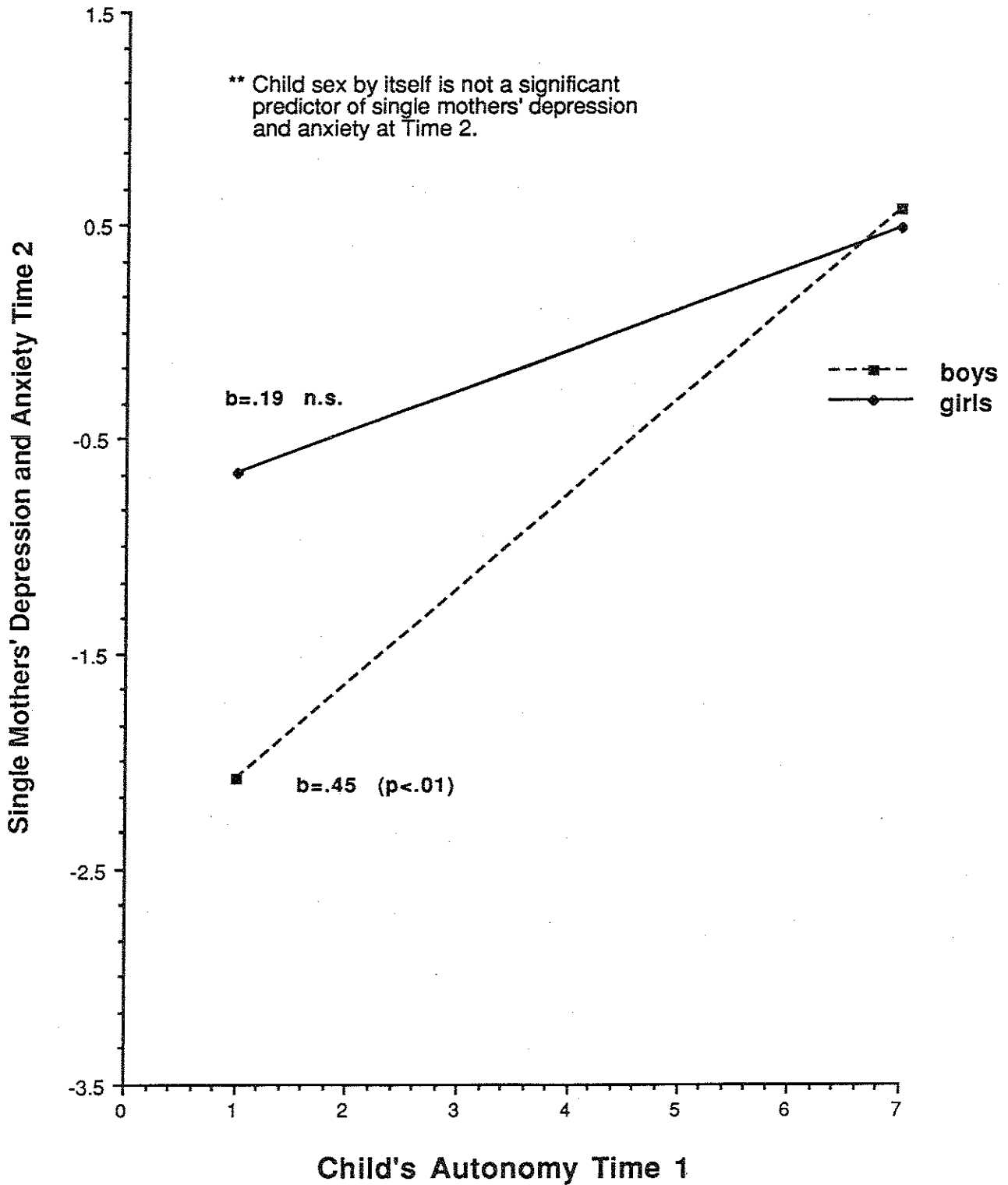
Further explorations in this domain will focus on the particular relationship between children's autonomy and psychological distress in single mothers. It is possible that single mothers possess limited time or financial resources, or that they are especially ambivalent or conflicted in the face of their children's increasing autonomy. We will try to illustrate the specific worries of single mothers in terms of their children's independence, e.g. worries about negative peer influences versus worries about a potential deterioration of the parent-child relationship that might accompany increased independence in children. In this way, we might better understand the relationship between the seemingly appropriate parenting behavior of encouraging autonomy and the resultant negative mental health outcomes in single mothers.

**The Relationship Between Marital Status X
Child Autonomy Interaction and Mothers' Depression and Anxiety**



The regression model controlled for mothers' depression and anxiety, the affective quality of the parent-child relationship, child sex, and the marital status x depression & anxiety interaction (Time 1). All reported results are $p < .028$.

The Relationship Between Child Autonomy and Single Mothers' Depression and Anxiety in Boys versus Girls



The regression models controlled for mothers' depression and anxiety and the affective quality of the mother-child relationship at Time 1.

References

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