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The Influence of Stress and Social Support on the Psychological Outcomes of Young Aboriginal Canadian and European Canadian Mothers

Approximately 70,000 live births to females 24 years of age and under occur each year in Canada. These young mothers may be at high risk for negative developmental and psychological outcomes for herself as well as her children. The risk factor of stress and the protective factor of social support on the psychological outcomes of young mothers were explored in the current longitudinal study. Further, the role of culture was explored because little research has examined these processes in young Aboriginal Canadian versus European Canadian mother populations.

Negative stressors occur more often among young mothers compared to adult mothers and their non-parenting peers, and are also associated with increased depressive symptoms. Therefore, different forms of stress including (1) parental stress, (2) daily hassles, and (3) major life stressors were explored to have a thorough understanding of the role of stress as a risk factor in the young mothers' lives within the two cultural groups. However, social support can assist in an easier transition into parenthood for young mothers and is related to a decrease in psychological distress as well as an enhanced psychological well-being. Alternately, the providers of support may create stressful experiences for young mothers resulting in a negative impact on young mothers' psychological well-being. Intimacy and instrumental support were the two separate forms of support examined within the current study.

The stress-buffering hypothesis was explored in the current longitudinal study to understand how the connection between individual forms of stress and support related to young mothers' psychological outcomes six months later. Based on the stress-buffering hypothesis, the presence of social support was expected to moderate the negative effects of stress on psychological outcomes. Depressive symptoms and overall well-being were used as indices of psychological outcomes.

Previous research has found cultural differences, such as Aboriginal Canadians experiencing higher levels of stress, social support, and depressive symptoms compared to European Canadians. Furthermore, the impact that their level of acculturation to their heritage culture or the mainstream European culture has on the Aboriginal mothers were examined in secondary analyses to identify if variations in acculturation impact young mothers' levels of stress, social support, and psychological outcomes.

The current research was part of an ongoing four time wave longitudinal study in Canada. Young Aboriginal (n = 18) and European Canadian (n = 24) mothers' stressors and social support were examined in relation to overall well-being and depressive symptoms. Each young mother completed an interview with a research assistant about their support network and a questionnaire booklet including (1) The Parental Events Scale, (2) The Daily Hassles Scale, (3) The Life Events Scale, (4) The Psychological Well-Being Scale, (5) Satisfaction with Life Scale, (5) Beck Depression Inventory II, and (6) Vancouver Index of Acculturation.

Results revealed that Aboriginal Canadian mothers experienced higher levels of parental stress compared to their European Canadian peers. However, both cultural groups' psychological outcomes were related to their levels of stress. Specifically for the Aboriginal Canadian sample, parental stress was associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms and lower levels of overall well-being. Higher levels of daily hassles were related to higher levels of depressive symptoms, but were not related to overall well-being. Contrary to expectations, Aboriginal Canadian mothers who reported

higher levels of major life stressors had lower levels of depressive symptoms and higher levels of overall well-being, which could be spurious findings due to the small sample size or measurement error. In relation to the European Canadian sample, those young mothers who had higher levels of parental stress had higher levels of depressive symptoms. The negative implications of parental stress for both cultural groups may be due to young mothers' inexperience with parenthood, lack of child development knowledge, and their inability to deal with the stress of the new child rearing role.

Contrary to expectations, the majority cultural group of European Canadian mothers tended to have higher levels of instrumental support such as financial support and child care assistance compared to the minority cultural group of Aboriginal Canadian mothers. However, there were no cultural differences in the amount of intimacy support the mothers received. This heightened level of instrumental support for European Canadian mothers may allow them to be more independent and focused on their educational and/or occupational success, which is implied within individualistic cultures. There were variations in how social support was related to psychological outcomes. These results revealed that young Aboriginal Canadian mothers with higher levels of intimacy support tended to have lower levels of depressive symptoms. However, for the European Canadian sample, higher levels of instrumental support tended to be associated with higher levels of overall well-being. These cultural variations may inform our understanding of how young mothers from different cultures need different forms of support.

In relation to psychological outcomes, young Aboriginal Canadian mothers had higher levels of depressive symptoms compared to their European Canadian counterparts, which may be a result of cultural struggles and racial discrimination experienced by minority groups and may lead to more negative psychological health. There were no cultural differences for overall well-being.

The stress buffering hypothesis was not supported for the current sample of young mothers. Contrary to expectations, for both cultural groups, a significant interaction between stress and social support predicted negative psychological outcomes. Further investigation of the interactions suggested that higher levels of both stress and social support related to higher levels of depressive symptoms and less overall well-being for the young mothers. These unexpected findings may be explained by support providers who contribute to young mothers' negative psychological outcomes. Finally, it is possible because of the low sample size for both cultural groups that the results are spurious findings.

The Aboriginal mothers' level of acculturation was also explored as secondary analyses and Aboriginal Canadian mothers who participated more in their heritage culture reported less parental stress and more major life stressors. Although the collectivistic view of including the community in raising the child may help to reduce the parental stress that new mothers experience, major life stressors may reflect the negative impact that historical racial discrimination can have on individuals from a minority culture. Those mothers who participated more in their heritage culture also reported higher levels of well-being and life satisfaction and lower levels of depressive symptoms. In addition, Aboriginal mothers who participated more in the mainstream culture tended to have higher levels of depressive symptoms, which support the idea the protective role of maintaining one's heritage culture.

These findings regarding young mothers' levels of stress and social support assist in understanding how parenting programs and interventions for young mothers can benefit their psychological outcomes. To promote healthy child development and an easy transition into parenthood for young mothers, services to reduce the anxiety and stress of becoming a parent may reduce their parenting stress and also act as a form of support. Financial assistance, child care, and parenting teaching services may assist the young mother, her child, and her family by creating a healthy family environment, increasing their psychological health, and promoting positive actions.