Studying Substance-Abusing Fathers: Can Evolutionary Concepts Help?

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Primary Goal

To illustrate how concepts drawn from evolutionary psychology may help us better understand the production and parenting of children within populations of substance-abusing men assumed to be at risk for socially irresponsible fathering...
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The Background: Policy Considerations

- Welfare reform

- Child welfare reform
  - PL 105-89: *Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997*

- DHHS Fatherhood Initiative
The Background: Risk for Children

- Paternal substance abuse = Risk for children
  - Externalizing difficulty
  - Internalizing difficulty
  - School failure
  - Early substance use
  - Early substance abuse

- Paternal drug abuse > Paternal alcohol abuse?
- Paternal + maternal substance abuse = More risk
The Background: Risk for Children

Where’s Poppa? (Phares, 1992)

- Paternal Risk
- Genetics
- Family Process
- Child Outcome

Fathering
Studying High-Risk Paternity: Life History Theory

- Life history theory
  - Evolutionary biology
  - Competing life functions
    - Somatic effort
      - Growth and survival of the individual
    - Reproductive effort
      - Growth and survival of the species
Studying High-Risk Paternity: Life History Theory

- Life history theory
  - Somatic effort versus reproductive effort
  - Between-species differences
  - Within-species differences
    - Evolutionary Theory of Socialization (Belsky et al., 1991)
Studying High-Risk Paternity: Reproductive Strategy

- Short-term = Low-K
  - Unstable, stressful early environment
    - M Inconsistent, insensitive caretaking
    - M Limited resources
  - Insecure attachment
  - Negative view of future
  - Short-term orientation
  - Early puberty
  - Early first sexual intercourse
Studying High-Risk Paternity: Reproductive Strategy

- Short-term = Low-K
  - Unstable sexual partnerships
  - Early first child
  - More children
  - Spaced closer
  - With different sexual partners
  - With less investment in parenting
  - Adaptive for individual
  - Socially irresponsible
Studying High-Risk Paternity: Reproductive Strategy

- Long-term = High-K
  - Stable, supportive early environment
    - Consistent, sensitive caretaking
    - Adequate resources
  - Secure attachment
  - Positive view of future
  - Longer-term orientation
  - Later puberty
  - Later first sexual intercourse
Studying High-Risk Paternity: Reproductive Strategy

- Long-term = High-K
  - Stable sexual partnerships
  - Later first child
  - Fewer children
  - Spaced further apart
  - With same sexual partner
  - With more investment in parenting
  - Adaptive for individual
  - Socially responsible
Are substance-abusing fathers at risk to pursue a short-term or low-K reproductive strategy?
Studying Reproductive History: Drug-Abusing Fathers

- Comparative study
  - 106 drug-abusing fathers
    - Opioid-dependent in methadone treatment
  - 118 fathers living in the same community
    - No history or alcohol or drug abuse
  - 40.4 (SD = 6.4) years old
  - Ethically diverse
    - 34% African American
    - 15% Hispanic
  - 12.7 (SD = 2.0) years of education
McMahon et al. (2010): Developmental Experiences of Drug-Abusing Fathers

Developmental Experiences of Drug-Abusing Fathers
McMahon et al. (2010): Developmental Experiences

Developmental Experiences of Drug-Abusing Fathers
Stover & McMahon (2010): Developmental Experiences

Developmental Experiences of Drug-Abusing Fathers

CTQ Scale Score

- DA+
- SA-

Emotional Abuse
Physical Abuse
Sexual Abuse

Developmental Experiences of Drug-Abusing Fathers

CTQ Scale Score

- DA+
- SA-

Emotional Neglect

Physical Neglect
McMahon et al. (2008): Reproductive History

[Bar chart showing the percentage of reproductive history by number of legal marriages for DA+ and SA- groups.]
McMahon et al. (2008): Reproductive History

Number of Live-In Relationships

Percent

0 1 2 3 4 5 >5

DA+  SA-

McMahon et al. (2008): Reproductive History
McMahon et al. (2008): Reproductive History

Age Became Father

Percent

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

DA+ SA-

16-24 25-42
McMahon et al. (2008): Reproductive History

Number of Children

Percent

DA+  SA-

1 2 3 4 5 >5
McMahon et al. (2008): Reproductive History

Number of Mothers

Percent

DA+  SA-
Studying High-Risk Paternity: Substance-Abusing Fathers

The concept of reproductive strategy borrowed from life history theory can help expand understanding of high-risk fathering occurring in the context of ongoing substance abuse...
Studying High-Risk Paternity: Expanding Our Understanding

- Conceptual framework to promote understanding
- Between-group differences
- Within-group differences
- Developmental perspective
- Moving beyond parenting behavior
- Neurobiologic + psychosocial influences
- Neurobiologic x psychosocial influences
Attachment Style

Personality

Reproductive Strategy

Contextual Factors

Sexual Behavior

Parenting Behavior

Genetic Predisposition

Developmental Experiences
Studying High-Risk Paternity: Challenges

- Stereotypes
- Response burden
  - Substance abuse
  - Family process
  - Child development
- Defining and measuring reproductive strategy
- Primary informant: Who speaks for Dad?
- Collateral informants
  - Poor coparenting relationships
  - Access to children
Studying High-Risk Paternity: Taking Another Perspective

- Individual-based approach
  - Longer-term orientation
    - Complicated by substance abuse
  - Shorter-term orientation
    - Concurrent with substance abuse

- Qualitative approach
  - Longer-term narratives
    - Complicated by substance abuse
  - Shorter-term narratives
    - Concurrent with substance abuse
Studying High-Risk Paternity: Conceptualizing Intervention

- Empirically informed conceptualization
- Focus on reproductive strategy
- Modular or adaptive approaches to intervention
  ▶ For fathers with a longer-term orientation
    M Guilt, secrets, reparation, reconnecting, loss
  ▶ For fathers with shorter-term orientation
    M Early trauma, shame, relationship-building, pregnancy prevention
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