

## Abstract

### *THE TRANSGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF EMOTION REGULATION: THE EFFECT OF MATERNAL COPING ON CHILD EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING.*

by

DEVON J. HARRISON

Advisor: Elliot Jurist, Ph.D.

There is a recognized link between maternal trauma history and adverse child outcomes, however the mechanisms underlying this intergenerational relationship are less clearly understood. Maternal emotion regulation, as measured by coping style, may help explain this cross-generational transmission, implicating the role of a mother's coping in her child's capacity to plan, attend, and self-inhibit. **Objective:** The purpose of this study is to examine the association between maternal coping style and child executive functioning (EF) in a sample of 188 urban mothers and their pre-adolescent and adolescent children. Data was analyzed from a larger cross-sectional and cross-generational study of maternal difficulties and child outcomes. **Method:** Mother-child data was analyzed from a hospital-based study that treating an impoverished, minority sample of women in New York City. Lifetime trauma history was assessed using *The Life Events Checklist (PTSD)*; maternal coping was measured by the *Coping Orientations to Problems Experienced Scale*, and child executive functioning (EF) was captured by *The Wisconsin Card Sorting Task & The Stroop Color and Word Test*. **Results & Conclusions:** Distinct coping patterns were expected to emerge from mothers with a significant trauma history as compared to those who have with no lifetime exposure. It was further anticipated that maternal coping style would influence child's executive cognitive functioning such that a mother's tendency to use Problem-Focused Coping (PFC) would be associated with her child's superior capacity to plan, sequence, and self-inhibit, while Emotion-Focused Coping

(EFC) in mothers would be linked to child deficits in these EF arenas. The conceptual model of the current study was based on theories of emotion regulation—that emotion dysregulation impacts the intergenerational transmission of maladjustment in multiple ways. The study further posited that trauma disrupts a mother’s capacity to self-regulate, thereby leading to negative child outcomes. While results did not support this predicted impact of trauma, findings did partially support the model that maternal emotion dysregulation is linked to negative child regulatory outcomes as maternal EFC was linked to poorer child EF. Inversely, Problem-Focused Coping represented adaptive emotion regulation and was partially linked to positive executive function outcomes in children. Implications for clinical interventions targeting trauma survivors will be discussed, with consideration given to the role of coping and its potential to interrupt the cross-generational cycle of trauma.