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The Effect of Early Life Social Stress on Anxiety-like Behaviors and Ethanol Drinking in Female Long-Evans Rats

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Introduction
Among women with Alcohol Use Disorders (AUDs), women have higher rates of anxiety-disorders and are more negatively influenced by early life stress compared to men.

Preclinical models studying the relationships between early life stress, anxiety-like behavior, and ethanol (EtOH) intake and preference have mainly use male subject.

Many attribute stress’s influence on brain development to the role of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, a part of the neuroendocrine system controlling stress reactions, which is still developing well into adolescence. Early life social stressors led to long-lasting effects in corticosteroid alterations in male rats (McCormick et al., 2005).

This study investigated the long term effects of chronic social instability on anxiety-like behavior in the elevated plus maze (EPM) and in self-administered EtOH consumption in females. We modified a model by McCormick et al. (2004), as it has previously shown usefulness in studying drug abuse vulnerability for nicotine.

Hypothesis: female Long Evans rats, when exposed to adolescent social instability, would exhibit more anxiety-like behavior and EtOH intake later in life than those in stable social situations.

Methods
Subjects: 32 Female Long Evans Rats arrived PND 21.

Social Instability Procedure (4 experimental groups):
- Social Isolation (Iso): rats raised 1/cage only handled for routine maintenance.
- Social Stability (SS): rats raised 2/cage only handled for routine maintenance.
- Chronic Social Instability (CSI): rats raised 2/cage, received one hour of isolation a day followed by a re-pairing with novel partner for the next 24 hours for 16 days.
- Acute Social Instability (aSI): rats raised 2/cage, received one hour of isolation on the last day and were then re-paired with novel partner for 24 hours (Day 16).

Anxiety- Like Behavior Measure: Elevated Plus Maze:
- Time spent in open vs. closed arms, arm entries. Measured 5 min. (Day 16).

CORT (corticosterone) Measurements:
- Blood via tail nick to obtain plasma for CORT measurements.
- Taken after behavior testing (Timepoint 1/T1) and after EtOH self-administration (Timepoint 2/T2)
- CORT measured using a 96 well plate competitive enzyme immunoassay containing a polyclonal CORT antibody (Immunodiagnostic Systems).

At the completion of behavioral testing, all of the cohort participated in EtOH self-administration:
- 20% EtOH/water given M, W, F for 4 weeks.
- 2 bottle choice- controlled for location preference.
- EtOH intake and preference were measured at 30min in 24h.

Figure 1. Experimental Timeline

Figure 2. No significant differences in open arm time

Figure 3. No significant difference in time spent in closed arm.

Figure 4. Iso CORT levels significantly lower compared to CSI and SS groups

Figure 5. No significant difference in time spent in closed arm

Figure 6. 30 minute ethanol intake g/kg

Figure 7. 24 hour ethanol intake g/kg

Figure 8. 30 minute time point preference

Figure 9. 24 hour time point preference

Conclusion
- Elevated Plus Maze: No significant differences in time spent on open arms or closed arm frequency.
- CORT: ISO females had significantly lower levels of CORT at Timepoint 1. The importance of this is unclear, but was taken in a single moment that may have influenced this result. There were no significant differences at Timepoint 2, suggesting no long-lasting HPA axis dysregulation.
- EtOH: No significant group differences for intake or preference.
- This data suggests that housing type does not produce a significant increase in anxiety-like behaviors and EtOH drinking in female rats.

Future work will expand upon these findings, utilizing different models of stress to induce an EtOH addiction-like phenotype in female Long – Evans rats.

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