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The Influence of a Mother’s Attachment Representation on the Quality of Her Interactions with Each of Her Children

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The Influence of a Mother’s Attachment Representation on the Quality of Her Interactions with Each of Her Children

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated whether certain maternal states of mind, as assessed by the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), would lead to more similarities/differences in maternal behaviors across multiple infants, as defined by the domains of the Maternal Behavior Q-sort (MBQS). Results indicated that “unsolved” maternal states of mind incline mothers to behave more similarly with their two infants than mothers with non-autonomous or autonomous states of mind in terms of responsiveness and affect sharing behaviors.

METHOD

Participants:
- Community sample of N = 33 adult mothers and their first and second born infants.
- Mean age of mothers was 31.30 years.
- First born infants were seen at home at M = 13 months (SD = 1.4). Second born infants were seen at home at M = 14.3 months (SD = 1.8). The average age spacing between siblings was 29 months (SD = 11.5).

MEASURES:
- The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI):
  - A semi-structured, approximately one hour long interview that investigates an individual's childhood relationships with caregivers, and early childhood attachment related experiences.
  - It is meant to assess one's state of mind regarding attachment relationships – Mothers are classified as having an autonomous, dismissing, preoccupied, or unresolved/disoriented state of mind.
- Maternal Behavior Q-sort (MBQS):
  - A coding procedure that provides a detailed description of the quality of maternal interaction with the infant (Pederson & Moran, 1995).
  - The MBQS consists of 90 items that are sorted equally into 9 piles along a rectangular distribution (pile one = least like the mother, pile 9 = most like the mother).

RESULTS

- MBQS Domains Internal Consistency (Cronbach’s Alphas):
  - Teaching orientation/independence, .73; physical contact/proximity, .78; sensitivity/awareness, .89; responsiveness/appropriateness/timing, .94; affect sharing, .85; response to distress, .90; social interaction, .76; baby-centric behavior, .85; and intrusive negativity, .91.
- Correlations between Sibling 1 and Sibling 2:
  - Mothers received a domain score for each infant. Domain scores for first born siblings and domain scores for second born siblings were correlated for each domain (see Table 1).

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N-A</th>
<th>U/D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=14)</td>
<td>(n=11)</td>
<td>(n=8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Orientation</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Contact</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity/Awareness</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.81*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness/Timing</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.88**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affect Sharing</td>
<td>.54*</td>
<td>.65*</td>
<td>.97**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to Distress</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Interaction</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.70*</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby-Centric Behavior</td>
<td>.55*</td>
<td>.62*</td>
<td>.92**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrusive Negativity</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Maternal Sensitivity</td>
<td>.65*</td>
<td>.81**</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Indicates correlations significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)
** Indicates correlations significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

- Z-Scores: Correlations were converted into Fisher’s Z scores. Z tests for significant differences were calculated.

CONCLUSIONS

- Contrary to expectations, the overall pattern of correlations does not suggest differences in similarity of interaction between autonomous and non-autonomous mothers. The present results suggest that autonomous mothers do not behave more similarly across siblings in interactions when compared to non-autonomous mothers.
- In fact, although correlations were not significantly different, non-autonomous mothers seem to behave in some domains more similarly with each infant than autonomous mothers (i.e. response to distress)
- Thus, my original conceptualization of flexibility may have been mistaken, and non-autonomous mothers’ inflexibility may instead be expressed in more behavioral similarities with each infant.
- Interestingly, U/D mothers were very similar with each infant in many domains, and were more similar in interactions with each sibling than autonomous and non-autonomous mothers.