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The Development of Disorganized Attachment in Infants of Adult and Adolescent Mothers

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INTRODUCTION

Attachment theory proposes that maternal sensitivity is the main developmental determinant of Organized attachment relationships in young children (Ainsworth et al., 1978; DeWolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997; Moffit et al., 1999). In contrast, Disorganized attachment relationships are held to be the product of heightened or impaired maternal interaction (Lorenz, Routh, Brothman, & Parson, 1999; Main & Hesse, 1990). However, more recent research has identified associations between low levels of maternal sensitivity and Disorganized attachment in high-risk populations (Bernier & Bernier, 2008; Bernier, Fonten, Evans, & Mitchell, 2007; DeWolff, deBruijn, van Hasselt, & Schuurman, 2004; DeWolff & van IJzendoorn, 1999). This makes the possibility that maternal sensitivity may contribute to the development of Disorganized attachment relationships in high-risk groups.

In all, the findings have yet to be replicated in low-risk samples, and the suggestion is based on maternal behaviour of mothers with children at risk of a prototypically sensitive mother. However, more research is necessary to understand the mechanisms through which this association occurs. However, more research is necessary to understand the mechanisms through which this association occurs. However, more research is necessary to understand the mechanisms through which this association occurs.

MEASURES

- Maternal Behaviour Q-Sort (MBQS; Pederson & Moran, 1990) - Global Sensitivity. The MBQS consists of 49 items that represent various aspects of maternal interactive behavior. Q-sort methodology is used to arrange the items into 9 piles of 10 items each. The MBQS items reflect behavior the infant experiences as frightened or frightening (van IJzendoorn & Schuengel, 1995). This makes the possibility that maternal sensitivity may contribute to the development of Disorganized attachment relationships in high-risk groups.

- Maternal Behaviour Q-Sort - Domains of Interactive Behavior. Domains of interactive behavior derived from the items of the MBQS were used to measure the direct content of maternal interactive behavior (van IJzendoorn & Schuengel, 1995). A dichotomous definition of Disorganization was used in all analyses, with infants who were measured using the standardized Strange Situation during the 90-item Q-sort).

PROCEDURE

- Home Visit: Two hour home observations were conducted by trained visitors to assess maternal behavior during mother-infant interactions when infants were 12 months old. Following this, adolescents were interviewed.

- Laboratory Visit: Attachment was assessed using the 910-item Q-sort during home observations, following procedures outlined by Ainsworth et al. (1978). Ainsworth et al. (1978) used a prototypically sensitive mother.

RESULTS

- There were no significant differences between adult mothers in Organized and Disorganized attachment relationships.

- Adolescent mothers in Disorganized attachment relationships scored significantly lower on global sensitivity (M = -.15, SD = 0.57) than those in Organized attachment relationships (M = .38, SD = 0.65).

- Adolescents in Organized attachment relationships scored significantly higher on overall sensitivity, maternal interactive behavior, and fewer Secure attachment relationships, than adult mothers in Disorganized relationships.

DISCUSSION

Adolescent mothers in Disorganized relationships also scored significantly lower on global sensitivity (M = -.15, SD = 0.57) than those in Organized attachment relationships (M = .38, SD = 0.65). Adolescents in Organized attachment relationships scored significantly higher on overall sensitivity, maternal interactive behavior, and fewer Secure attachment relationships, than adult mothers in Disorganized relationships.

There are several potential explanations for these findings:

- Alternatively, sensitivity may represent an alternative pathway to Disorganized attachment through the same mechanisms as current theory, suggesting they may be an antecedent associated with the development of Disorganized relationships in high-risk populations.

- It is possible that mothers in Disorganized relationship observed significantly lower sensitivity in interaction than those in Organized relationships, however, the later was not true of the adult group, suggesting suggestions that the origins of the attachment pattern may differ between high-risk and low-risk groups. In particular, levels of depression, anxiety, and stress may differ between high-risk and low-risk groups.

- There are also several potential explanations for these findings:

- Alternatively, sensitivity may represent an alternative pathway to Disorganized attachment through the same mechanisms as current theory, suggesting they may be an antecedent associated with the development of Disorganized relationships in high-risk populations.