Antecedents of Attachment Disorganization across the First Year: Interactions among Child and Parent Variables

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Antecedents of Attachment Disorganization across the First Year: Interactions among Child and Parent Variables

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INTRODUCTION

Disorganized attachment is seen as reflecting an infant’s lack of strategy for coping with the stress of the Strange Situation procedure (SSP; Ainsworth et al., 1978). The identification of disorganized attachment by Main and Solomon (1986) generated a large body of research into its antecedents and consequences. Despite these advances, however, few studies have employed a prospective longitudinal design to clarify antecedents of disorganization, and most research has focused on predicting disorganization from single risk factors, rarely investigating possible interactions among child and parent or environmental variables.

PRESENT STUDY

The current study investigated the development of disorganized attachment across the first year from a prospective longitudinal perspective from 3 – 13 months. A primary goal was to employ a transactional model to predict disorganization at the end of the first year, with a focus on interactions among a variety of child (gender, stressful child characteristics) and parent variables (parenting stress, maternal behaviour, child care).

METHOD

Participants

Community sample of N = 66 adult mothers and their first-born infants.

Mean age of mothers was 30.08. Majority of mothers were married (75%) and had completed an average of 14.52 years of education. Average household income was $50,000 - $59,999.

Parents were married (75%) and had completed an average of 14.52 years of education. Average household income was $50,000 - $59,999.

Method

The current study investigated the development of disorganized attachment across the first year from a prospective longitudinal perspective from 3 – 13 months. A primary goal was to employ a transactional model to predict disorganization at the end of the first year, with a focus on interactions among a variety of child (gender, stressful child characteristics) and parent variables (parenting stress, maternal behaviour, child care).

Measures

Parenting Stress Inventory (PSI, Abidin, 1990).
Mothers completed the PSI to report on parenting stress related to both Child and Parent characteristics. High scores reflect greater stress.

Maternal sensitivity. Based on 2-hour observations of parent-infant interaction at home, maternal behaviour was assessed using 1) Ainsworth’s Maternal Sensitive Scales (Ainsworth et al., 1974) & 2) Maternal Behaviour Q-Sort (MBQS; Pederson et al., 1999).

Frightening/frightened (FR) maternal behaviour (Main & Hesse, 1992, 1998). The FR Coding System was used to assess anomalous parental behaviour during parent-infant interaction at home.

Non-maternal Care. Mothers reported on a variety of child care variables, including Quantity of non-maternal care (mean hours away from the mother per week), Age of entry into non-maternal care, and Stability of care (number of changes to child care arrangements).


Procedure

3-months: Home Visit

PSI, Demographics (income, education, maternal age, infant gender)

4-months: Home Visit

Maternal Sensitivity, Non-maternal Care, Demographics

10-months: Home Visit

PSI, Non-maternal Care, Maternal Sensitivity, FR Behaviour, Demographics

13-months: Laboratory Visit

Assessment of Attachment

RESULTS

Significant Associations with D:
Infant Gender χ² (1) = 5.14*, 73% of D’s were male
Stressful Child Characteristics (PSI, 10mo)
Total Child Stress, r = .25*, Lack of Positive Reinforcement, r = .23*, Difficult Mood, r = .28*, Demandingness, r = .22*.

Parent-related Stress (PSI, 3&10mo)
Attachment r = .32**, Competence, r = .25
Maternal Behaviour
Interference (4mo) r = .26*, MBQS sensitivity (10mo) r = .22*, FR Behaviour (10mo) r = .38**

Quantity of non-maternal care (Hours per week)
4mo. (r = .28*) & 10mo. (r = .25*) Stability of Child Care Arrangement (r = .22*)

Predicting D from Interactions Among Antecedent Variables:

1) Infant gender X PSI Attachment (3mo)
dedicated D, R = .49, F (3, 61) = 6.58*. High maternal attachment-related stress was most predictive of D for male infants, β = 1.19, F (61) = 3.67** (See Figure 1).

2) Quantity of non-maternal care (10mo) X MBQS Sensitivity (10mo)
dedicated D only when mothers displayed low sensitivity at home, β = 0.06, F (60) = 2.9** (See Figure 2).

CONCLUSIONS

Disorganization was associated with a variety of child and parent/environmental variables across the first year of life.

There appear to be complex interactional effects between the child’s vulnerability (male gender, difficult mood) and parental/ environmental characteristics (parenting stress related to low competence and the attachment relationship, quantity of non-maternal care, maternal sensitivity) that contribute to the development of disorganized relationships.

These results can be conceptualized within an additive interactional model of development. Certain variables (male gender, non-maternal care) may constitute vulnerability factors for infants and the cumulative effects of these vulnerability factors over the first year are likely to increase the likelihood of developing a disorganized relationship.