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### My Partner or My Parents? Parent-Specific Effects on Relationship Attributional Styles

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# My partner or my parents? Parent-specific effects on relationship attributional style.

Katherine Iwasityn, Samantha Wagner, and Richard Mattson

## Background

One's attributional style shapes how events and behaviors are perceived and justified. In the context of intimate relationships, it is considered ideal to attribute partners' positive behaviors as intrinsic and their negative behaviors as extrinsic, whereas the converse yields increased instances of conflict and relationship dissatisfaction (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992; Kimmes et al., 2015). Although little about the origin of attributional style has been investigated (Kimmes et al., 2015), studies have reported instances of parent-specific intergenerational transmission:

- Problematic relationship attributions were associated with perceived negative attributions of fathers (Benson et al., 1992).
- Hostile attributional style in children were related to their mother's hostile attributional biases, with the strongest association recorded between mother-daughter dyads. (Werner, 2012).

Thus, the aim of this poster was to examine whether an association exists between the way one bonded with their parents and their current relationship attributional style.

## Methods

### Procedure

Participants signed informed consent and completed the respective surveys individually. At the end of the study, participants were monetarily compensated.

### Demographics

*Gender:* 49.5% of the participants were men (n = 189) and 50.5% of the participants were women (n = 193).

*Age:* M = 34.17, SD = 19.63

*Race:* 80.4% of participants were Caucasian

### Measures

*Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI; Parker et al., 1979):*

- 3-Point Likert scale reflecting care versus overprotection, with separate evaluations of mother and father.
- "Spoke to me in a warm friendly voice" (0-Very Like, 3-Very Unlike)
- A high value in care indicates more care and a high value in protection indicates high protection.

*Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM; Fincham et al., 1992):*

- 6-Point Likert scale evaluating how one attributes behaviors in a relationship.
- "My husband criticized me on purpose rather than unintentionally" (1-Disagree Strongly, 6-Agree Strongly)
- A higher value indicates a less adaptive attributional style.

## Discussion

Our hypotheses were partially supported, in that our data revealed gender-specific effects for the relationship between relationship attributional style and parental-bonding.

- For women, only maternal care was moderately positively associated with adaptive relationship attributional styles, though maternal and paternal care were correlated.
  - This finding is consistent with previous studies that have also found associations between higher maternal care and better cognitive appraisals (Cheung et al., 2017; Benson et al., 1992).
  - Since only maternal care was associated with more adaptive relationship attribution tendencies for women, it may be that men and women differ in their displays of affection. In turn, higher care from the mother may prime women to interpret behaviors less negatively.
  - On the other hand, women who have more adaptive attributional styles may be more likely to also have retrospections that are positively biased.
- For men, only paternal overprotection was moderately negatively associated with adaptive relationship attributional styles, though paternal and maternal overprotection were correlated.
  - Paternal overprotection has been associated with other problematic behaviors such as decreased adaptive skills, increased externalizing problems, alcohol-use disorder, and social reticence in both sexes but with an increased salience among males (Ruiz-Ortiz et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2016; Patock-Peckham et al., 2009; Guimond et al., 2011).
  - Although reports of paternal overprotection were associated with maternal overprotection, men and women may exhibit differing types of protection. For instance, paternal overprotection has been previously associated with shame whereas mother's overprotection was related with worry (Mills et al., 2007). This differentiation may help explain why an association was found between paternal overprotection and current maladaptive relationship patterns.
- We found no support for a relationship between paternal care and men or women's relationship attribution styles, or for maternal overprotectiveness and men or women's relationship attribution styles. Additionally maternal care and parental overprotectiveness did not relate to relationship attribution styles for men and women, respectively.

## Hypothesis

H1: Greater levels of parental care will be associated with a more adaptive relationship attributional style.

H2: Greater levels of parental overprotection will be associated with a less adaptive relationship attributional style.

## Results

Table 1. Correlations of Men's PBI and RAM scores

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Maternal Care	--				
2. Maternal Overprotection	-.331**	--			
3. Paternal Care	.368**	-.177*	--		
4. Paternal Overprotection	-.314**	.536**	-.249**	--	
5. Relationship Attribution Score	-.066	.108	-.129	.209*	--

Note. \*p < .05, \*\*p < .001

Table 2. Correlations of Women's PBI and RAM scores

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Maternal Care	--				
2. Maternal Overprotection	-.310**	--			
3. Paternal Care	.450**	-.135	--		
4. Paternal Overprotection	-.243**	.275**	-.343**	--	
5. Relationship Attribution Score	-.203*	.126	-.114	.049	--

Note. \*p < .05, \*\*p < .001

## Conclusion

Relationship attributional style involves consistent misinterpretation of events and of behaviors, which can result in unnecessary interspousal conflict in marriages, and is a practical target for treatment. We found an association between parental bonding and one's attributional style, meaning that an understanding of partner parental-bonding may be relevant to treating a key underpinning of conflict. We also observed a gender effect and, although reports of mother-father bonding were similar, only same-sex parent-offspring dyads were related to attributional style.

## References

Available upon request. Please email kiwasui1@binghamton.edu