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Beyond Sensitivity: Patterns of Maternal Interaction in Secure vs. Non-Secure Attachment Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

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- Attachment theory proposes that the sensitivity of a mother's interactions with her child is the main developmental determinant of the quality of their attachment relationship (Ainsworth et al., 1978; De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997).
- Empirical findings have generally supported this assertion; however, the strength of this association remains a matter of debate as the results of empirical findings have been highly variable (Atkinson et al., 2000; DeWolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997).
- Several researchers have suggested that assessing maternal behaviour as a single global dimension may fail to capture important variation in the quality of interactions that influence the developing attachment relationship (van IJzendoorn, 1995; Pederson et al., 1998).
- Consequently, assessing distinct aspects of maternal interactive behaviour may provide additional insight into the maternal contribution to the quality of the attachment relationship.

PURPOSE OF THE CURRENT STUDY

- To establish distinct domains of maternal interaction from the Maternal Behaviour Q-Sort (MBQS, Pederson & Moran, 1995), a widely validated measure of global sensitivity (Atkinson et al., 2000), and to assess their associations with the quality of the attachment relationship.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

- Forty-nine adult mothers (> 20 years old at time of birth) and their infants
 - Average Annual Income: \$30,000 - \$40,000
 - Marital Status: 91% married or common-law; 8.2% single
 - Average highest level of Maternal Education: 14.51 years

METHOD CONT'D

MATERIALS

- **Maternal Behaviour Q-Sort.** The MBQS consists of 90 items that represent various aspects of maternal interactive behaviour. Experienced observers arrange the items into nine piles of ten cards, ranging from pile 1 (*Least like the mother*) to 9 (*Most like the mother*). Global sensitivity is calculated as the correlation between the scores of the observers Q-sort with those of a theoretically constructed sort of a prototypically sensitive mother.
- **Domains of MBQS.** Experienced sorters divided the 90 items of the MBQS into distinct groups based on similarities in the content of the aspect of maternal interaction described by each item. A brief conceptual description of each factor – or "domain" – represented by the items in each resulting group was then composed. Each item was then re-examined to ensure it accurately represented the unifying theme of each group of items. This process resulted in the inclusion of 76 items, sorted into 9 domains, with 4 to 12 items in each group (see Table 1).
- Domain scores, which describe levels of maternal behavior on each domain, were calculated by averaging the values assigned to each card in the MBQS sort for all items within a domain. These domains were used to describe the content of a mother's behaviour during interactions with her infants.
- **Strange Situation Procedure (SSP, Ainsworth et al., 1978).** Attachment relationships were measured using the SSP, following procedures outlined by Ainsworth et al. (1978).

PROCEDURE

- **Home Visit:** Two-hour home observations of maternal interactive behaviour were made by trained visitors when infants were 12 months old. Following these observations, visitors completed a sort of the 90-item MBQS.
- **Laboratory Visit:** Assessment of attachment using the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP, Ainsworth et al., 1978) when infants were 13 months old.

Table 1. Internal Consistency and Number of Items for Domains of Interactive Behaviour

Domains of Interactive Behaviour	Total Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Awareness	12	.93
Response Effectiveness	10	.89
Positive Affect	7	.88
Rejection	8	.87
Synchrony	11	.92
Controlling/Interfering	12	.88
Exploration and Learning	7	.55
Comfort with Contact	5	.84
Engagement	4	.80

RESULTS

DOMAIN DESCRIPTIONS

Awareness.

- **HIGH:** constantly alert to baby's cues, regardless of competing demands; may not respond, but clearly acknowledges his signals
- **LOW:** demonstrates lapses in awareness; oblivious to baby's signals

Response Effectiveness.

- **HIGH:** consistently responds effectively to all signals, obvious and subtle, in such a way that satisfies the baby
- **LOW:** either does not respond to baby's signals, or interventions are not appropriate as evidenced by baby's response

Positive Affect.

- **HIGH:** outwardly expressive of positive feelings toward baby
- **LOW:** lack of affection and positive expression; not necessarily hostile or rejecting toward baby, rather, lacks animation and positive expression in their interactions

Rejection.

- **HIGH:** actively rejects by expressing annoyance or anger at baby's overtures; quick to criticize and punish baby's actions; focuses on negative aspects of the interaction
- **LOW:** accepts the baby, and does not express feelings of irritation or frustration towards him

Synchrony.

- **HIGH:** adapts behaviour to match baby's current interests; encounters are neither abruptly initiated or terminated
- **LOW:** does not engage in harmonious interactions with baby, even if she is attempting to do so; behaviours are often unmatched and out of tune with baby's

Controlling/Interfering.

- **HIGH:** shows little respect for baby; acts in accordance with her own agenda despite the fact that baby's wishes are not in accordance with her own; ignores the baby's protests and continues at her own pace.
- **LOW:** supports (versus controls) the interactions; interferes as little as possible, or only when absolutely necessary

Facilitation of Exploration and Learning.

- **HIGH:** structures the environment and interactions to promote learning and development of exploratory behaviours, but involvement does not necessarily have an intrusive quality
- **LOW:** often uncomfortable with her baby's exploration and does not encourage independent exploration of the environment

Comfort with Physical Contact.

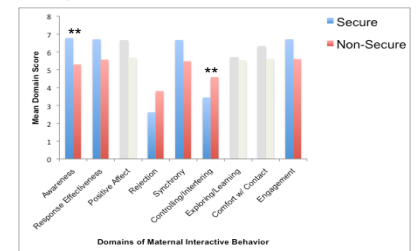
- **HIGH:** shows ease with close proximity and contact, and welcomes intimate overtures from her baby
- **LOW:** awkward and uncomfortable during intimate encounters, and often uses objects to mediate interactions

Engagement.

- **HIGH:** seeks out social encounters with her baby, eliciting his attention and using vocalizations throughout their interactions
- **LOW:** A mother low on this domain does not often initiate interactions and conversations with her baby

RESULTS CONT'D

Table 2. Mothers in Secure and Non-secure Relationships Display Contrasting Patterns of Interaction



Multivariate $F(9,39) = 1.24, p < .05$
 Note: Domains in which mothers in secure and non-secure relationships differed significantly at $p < .05$ are coloured; those that differed at $p < .01$ are further demarcated with two asterisks.

- Mean levels of global maternal sensitivity also differed for mothers in secure ($M = .63, SD = .34$) and non-secure relationships ($M = .23, SD = .67; p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

- Various aspects of maternal interactive behaviour appear to be differentially related to the quality of the attachment relationship.
- *Awareness* and *Controlling/Interfering* were most closely associated with variation in attachment security; levels of these domains showed the greatest variation between mothers in Secure versus non-Secure relationships.
- In contrast, *Positive Affect*, *Facilitation of Exploration and Learning* and *Comfort with Physical Contact* did not differ between mothers in Secure and non-Secure relationships.
- These findings confirm research suggesting that specific aspects of maternal interactive style are at least as strongly associated with the quality of the attachment relationship as overall sensitivity (De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997; Raval et al., 2001).
- For example, other findings suggest that high levels of maternal monitoring may be important determinants of Secure relationships (Atkinson et al., 2000; Raval et al., 2001). This is consistent the current study, which indicates that high levels of *Awareness* are more strongly related to attachment security than many other aspects of the interaction.
- Thus, more detailed descriptions of maternal interactions (beyond the traditional measure of global sensitivity) likely provide a clearer indication of maternal behaviours that make important contributions to the quality of the attachment relationship.