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Interaction in the Home of Mothers and Infants in Disorganized Attachment Relationships

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: To describe the interaction of adolescent mothers and their infants in Disorganized attachment relationships observed in the home.

RESULTS: Distinctive patterns of interaction were observed even though 1) interactions occurred under conditions of relatively low attachment-related stress, and 2) these distinctions involved behaviour used to describe normative mother-infant interaction rather than the atypical indices traditionally used to identify Disorganized dyads.

CONCLUSION: The origins and impact of Disorganized attachment may be more pervasive than sometimes conceptualized.

INTRODUCTION

Attachment is an enduring social emotional tie between caregiver and child (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1969) and provides an organized foundation for future social relationships

Current conceptualizations of Disorganization suggest that:

- 1) It occurs primarily under conditions of stress, e.g.,

“...brief momentary collapse [italics added] of attentional and behavioural strategies whenever attachment-related fear is implicated” (Main & Hesse, 1990, p. 169).

“...an apparent lack of, or collapse of, a consistent strategy for organizing responses to the need for comfort and security when under stress” (LyonsRuth, 1996, p. 67)

- 2) Interaction under lower stress conditions reflects an underlying, organized pattern of attachment, e.g.,

“... the breakdown of an otherwise consistent and organized strategy of emotion regulation...” (van IJzendoorn et al., 1999, p. 226)

- 3) Its expression is largely restricted to atypical, anomalous patterns of infant and mother behaviour (c.f. coding schemes of infants (Main & Solomon, 1990) and mothers (FR scheme - Main & Hesse, 1992) and AMBIANCE scheme - Lyons Ruth et al, 1999).

STUDY RATIONALE

- Disorganized attachment has been little studied in the home
- Recent research suggests that, in addition to the explicit manifestations of

Disorganization, such dyads display distinct and pervasive patterns of interaction that can be observed well beyond situations of unusual attachment stress (Carlson, 1999; van Bakel & Riksen-Walraven, 2004; van IJzendoorn, 2004).

Current study examines normal interaction of mothers and infants in relatively low stress conditions of the home to further explore the naturalistic expression of Disorganized attachment.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

99 adolescent mother-infant dyads who were part of a larger longitudinal study. Adolescent mothers were recruited from two city hospitals.

Mothers ranged from 15.9 to 19.9 years at infant birth (M = 18.4, SD = .99). 59% were single and 44% were on social assistance and had completed an average of 11 years of education. 47% reported a history of trauma and 63% met the cut-off for depression on the CES-D when their infants were 12-months of age.

MEASURES

Strange Situation (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Main & Solomon, 1990)

Mother-infant attachment relationships were assessed at 12 months using the Strange Situation procedure and were classified as either Organized (Secure, Avoidant, Ambivalent) or Disorganized.

12-Month Assessments of Infant and Maternal Interaction in the Home

Infant Attachment Q-sort (AQ5): Completed by observer during 3-hour home visit. Infant attachment security scores were derived by comparing the observer's sort of 90 items describing infant interaction behaviour to a criterion sort of a hypothetical prototypically secure infant. (Waters, 1987)

Maternal Behaviour Q-sort (MBQS): The MBQS consists of 90 items that describe maternal behaviour in the home and are sorted into piles ranging from 1-least like this mother, to 9-most like this mother. A continuous score for maternal sensitivity was calculated for each mother. The MBQS was completed after each 2-hour long home visit at 12 and 24 months. (Pederson & Moran, 1996)

RESULTS

HOME INTERACTION AND DISORGANIZATION

1) Global Measures of Interaction

Infants in Disorganized relationships displayed significantly lower levels of AOS security at home (M = -.01, SD = .37) than

those in Organized relationships (M = .31, SD = .32; t (97) = -4.38, p < .001).

Mothers in Disorganized relationships displayed significantly lower levels of MBQS sensitivity at home (M = -.08, SD = .59) than those in Organized relationships (M = .45, SD = .53; t (97) = -4.59, p < .001).

2) Distinctive Themes of Interaction in the Home Associated with Disorganization

Themes were identified on the basis of individual items in the AOS description of infant interaction and MBQS descriptions of maternal interaction that most distinguished between the interactions of Disorganized and non-Disorganized dyads. Items were chosen on the basis of both correlations with Strange Situation D-scores and differences of the average scores on each item of infants and mothers in Disorganized vs. Organized dyads.

Infant Themes. (Representative AOS Items)

Lack of engagement with mother

25. Child is easy for mother to lose track of when he is playing out of her sight. **HI**
90. If mother moves very far, child follows along and continues his play in the area she has moved to. **LOW**

14. When child finds something new to play with, he carries it to mother or shows it to her from across the room. **LOW**
70. Child quickly greets his mother with a big smile when she enters the room. **HI**

86. Child tries to get mother to imitate him, or quickly notices and enjoys it when mom imitates him on her own. **LOW**
35. Child is independent with mother. Prefers to play on his own. Leaves mother easily when he wants to play. **HI**

59. When child finishes with an activity or toy, he returns to mother for play, affection, or help finding more to do. **LOW**
69. Rarely asks mother for help. **HI**

83. When child is bored, he goes to mother looking for something to do. **LOW**

Failure to use the mother when distressed

88. When something upsets the child, he stays where he is and cries. **HI**
80. Child uses mother's facial expressions as a good source of information when something looks risky or threatening. **LOW**

Lack of compliance

1. Child readily shares with mother or lets her hold things if she asks to. **LOW**
18. Child follows mother's suggestions readily, even when they are clearly suggestions rather than orders. **LOW**

19. When mother tells child to bring or give her something, he obeys. **LOW**

Anger at mother and toys

61. Plays roughly with mother. Bumps, scratches or bites during active play. **HI**
30. Child easily becomes angry with toys. **HI**

Maternal Themes. (Representative MBOS Items)

Lack of contingency/synchronicity within the interaction

1. Provides B with little opportunity to contribute to the interaction. **LOW**
17. Content and pace of interaction set by M rather than according to B's responses. **HI**
32. Non-synchronous interactions with B: i.e., the timing of Ms behaviour out of phase with B's behaviour. **HI**

35. Well resolved interaction with B - interaction ends when B is satisfied - also consider the termination of ongoing interactions that B is enjoying. **LOW**
71. Builds on the focus of B's attention. **LOW**
85. Interactions with B are incomplete. **HI**

Lack of responding to and monitoring of infant; mother is inaccessible both physically and psychologically

4. During interaction with visitor does not notice B. **HI**

2. Monitors B's activities during visit. **LOW**
22. Appears to tune out and not notice bids for attention. **HI**

27. Responds to B's distress and non-distress signals even when engaged in some other activity such as having a conversation with visitor. **LOW**
65. Responds to B's signals. **LOW**

Failure to assist the infant in the mutual regulation of affect

20. Responds accurately to signals of distress. **LOW**

27. Responds to B's distress and non-distress signals even when engaged in some other activity such as having a conversation with visitor. **LOW**

44. Realistic expectations regarding B's self-control of affect. **LOW**
79. Distressed by B's demands. **HI**

84. Display of affect does not match B's display of affect (e.g., smiles when B is distressed). **HI**

Lack of protection of the infant

36. Interrupts activity that is likely to be dangerous. **LOW**

28. Offers an acceptable alternative to B to divert attention from inappropriate activity. **LOW**
6. Supports interaction of B with visitor. **LOW**

Lack of respect for baby as an individual and hostility

55. Respects B as an individual, i.e., able to accept B's behaviour even if it is not consistent with her wishes. **LOW**
60. Scolds or criticizes B. **HI**

CONCLUSIONS

Disorganization is distinctively expressed in the interactions of mothers and infants beyond situations of unusual attachment-related stress and has a marked impact on the quality of naturalistic interactions in the home.

Distinctive characteristics of the interaction of mothers and infants in Disorganized relationships are expressed in behaviour typically used to characterize the interactions of organized attachment in addition to the atypical, anomalous behaviour used to identify such relationships.

These distinctive patterns of interaction in the home suggest that Disorganization represents an absence or an organized attachment strategy rather than a temporary breakdown of such a strategy.

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