Psychology Presentations   Psychology Department

6-2009

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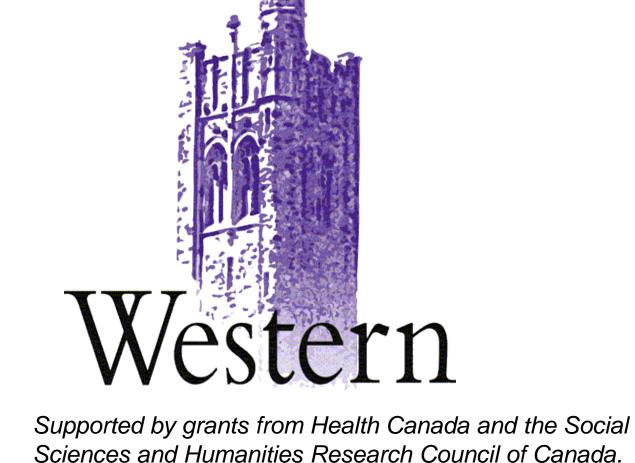Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/psychologypres

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The Influence of a Mother's Attachment Representation on the Quality of Her Interactions with Each of Her Children

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated whether certain maternal states of mind, as assessed by the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), would lead to more similarities/differences in maternal behaviors across multiple infants, as defined by the domains of the Maternal Behavior Q-Sort. Results indicated that "unresolved" maternal states of mind incline mothers to behave more similarly with their two infants than mothers with non-autonomous or autonomous states of mind in terms of responsiveness and affect sharing behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

➢ Attachment theory holds that a mother's cognitive representation of attachment influences the quality of her interactions with her infant and, in turn, the relationship they share.

➢ Given that theory also suggests attachment representations are relatively stable, it follows that a mother's interactions and relationships with each of her infants be similar. Research shows, however, that mothers often develop distinct relationships with each of their children.

➢ I investigated the possibility that different representations, or states of mind, regarding attachment may vary in the extent to which they incline a mother to exhibit a similar or dissimilar quality of interaction with her multiple children. Such variation might provide a partial explanation of differences in mother-infant attachment relationships between siblings.

HYPOTHESES

➢I expected a mother with an autonomous state of mind to be more flexible than her non-autonomous counterpart and, thus, be more able to adapt appropriately to each of her infants' unique needs.

➢ I, therefore, expected an autonomous mother to behave relatively more similarly with each infant than a non-autonomous mother as reflected in domain scores of the Maternal Behavior Q-Sort (MBQS) that are most prominently linked to a secure attachment relationship, i.e. with regards to sensitivity, responsiveness, and response to distress.

➢Existing theory provided no basis for specific predictions regarding mothers with Unresolved/disoriented states of mind.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

➢ Community sample of $N = 33$ adult mothers and their first and second born infants.
➢ Mean age of mothers was 31.30 years.
➢First born infants were seen at home at $M = 13$ months ($SD = 1.4$). Second born infants were seen at home at $M = 14.3$ months ($SD = 1.8$). The average age spacing between siblings was 29 months ($SD = 11.5$).

MEASURES

➢ *The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI):*
- A semi-structured, approximately one hour long interview that investigates an individual's childhood relationships with caregivers, and early childhood attachment related experiences.
- It is meant to assess one's state of mind regarding attachment relationships – Mothers are classified as having an autonomous , dismissing, preoccupied, or unresolved/disoriented state of mind.

➢ *Maternal Behavior Q-sort (MBQS):*
- A coding procedure that provides a detailed description of the quality of maternal interaction with the infant (Pederson & Moran, 1995).
- The MBQS consists of 90 items that are sorted equally into 9 piles along a rectangular distribution (pile one = least like the mother, pile 9 = most like the mother).

➢ *MBQS domains:*
- Attachment theory experts divided the 90 items from the MBQS into 9 conceptually distinct domains.

PROCEDURE

➢Two observers were invited into the homes of participants to observe infant-mother interactions over a span of 2 hours.

➢Mothers were asked to engage in interactions with their children during play with toys, play with no toys, and maternal divided attention tasks. After each visit, visitors described the quality of interactions using the MBQS.

➢On a separate occasion, mothers completed the AAI with an individual trained in conducting the interview. AAI's were completed when the second born infants were approximately 12-15 months of age.

RESULTS

➢MBQS Domains Internal Consistency (Cronbach's Alphas)-

teaching orientation/independence, .73; physical contact/proximity, .78; sensitivity/awareness, .89; responsiveness/appropriateness/timing, .94; affect sharing, .85; response to distress, .90; social interaction, .76; baby-centric behavior, .85; and intrusive negativity, .91.

➢ **Correlations between Sibling 1 and Sibling 2:** Mothers received a domain score for each infant. Domain scores for first born siblings and domain scores for second born siblings were correlated for each domain (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Domain Correlations for Autonomous (A), Non-Autonomous (N-A), and Unresolved/Disoriented (U/D) Mothers

Domains	Maternal State of Mind		
	A (n=14)	N-A (n=11)	U/D (n= 8)
Teaching Orientation	.40	.27	.38
Physical Contact	.28	.44	.42
Sensitivity/Awareness	.42	.40	.81*
Responsiveness/Timing	.24	.59	.88**
Affect Sharing	.54*	.65*	.97**
Response to Distress	.23	.55	.62
Social Interaction	.50	.70*	.48
Baby-Centric Behavior	.55*	.62*	.92**
Intrusive Negativity	.43	.54	.58
Global Maternal Sensitivity	.65*	.81**	.36

* Indicates correlations significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)
** Indicates correlations significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

➢ **Z-Scores:** Correlations were converted into Fisher's z scores. Z tests for significant differences were calculated.

Significant Z-Scores:

Autonomous vs. U/D:
Responsiveness: **Z = 2.10, p<.05**,
U/D greater correlation than autonomous
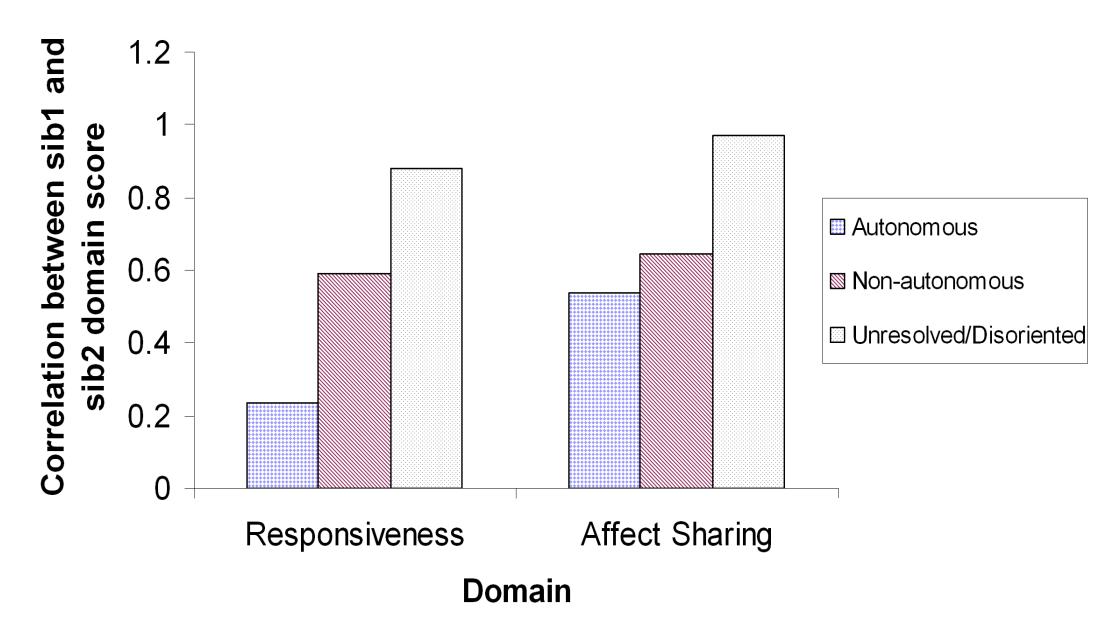Affect Sharing: **Z = 2.77, p<.05**,
U/D greater correlation than autonomous

Non-autonomous vs. U/D:
Affect Sharing: **Z = 2.32, p<.05**,
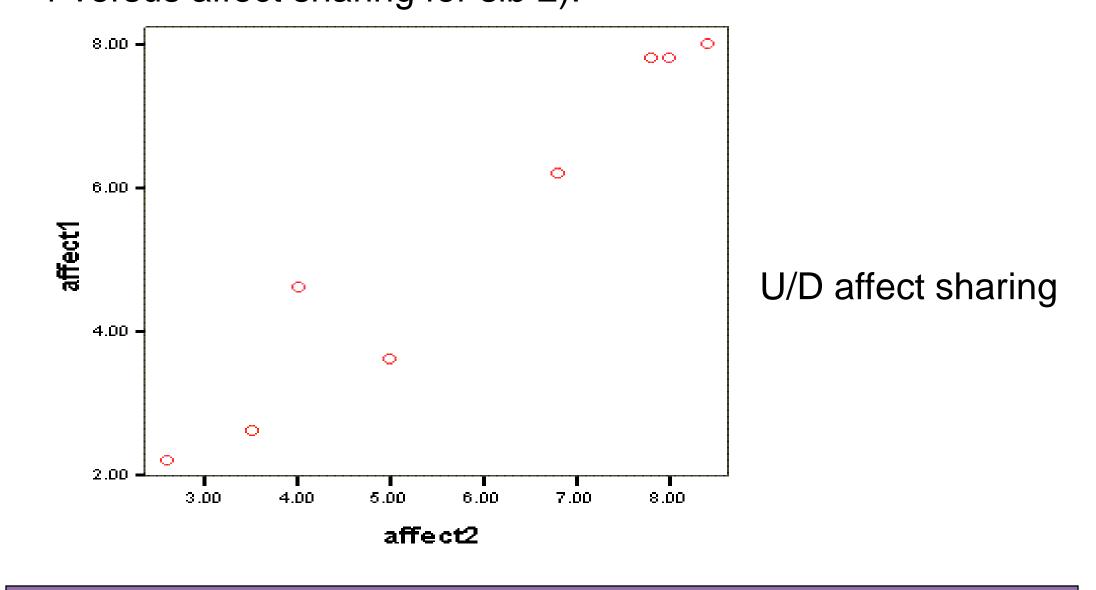U/D greater correlation than non-autonomous

These comparisons are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Similarities in Maternal Behaviors Across Siblings for Different Maternal States of Mind

Scatter plot graphs confirmed that high correlations found within the U/D population were not driven by outliers (example depicts domain scores for affect sharing for sib 1 versus affect sharing for sib 2):

U/D affect sharing

CONCLUSIONS

➢ Contrary to expectations, the overall pattern of correlations does not suggest differences in similarity of interaction between autonomous and non-autonomous mothers. The present results suggest that autonomous mothers do not behave more similarly across siblings in interactions when compared to non-autonomous mothers.

➢In fact, although correlations were not significantly different, non-autonomous mothers seem to behave in some domains more similarly with each infant than autonomous mothers (i.e. response to distress)

➢ Thus, my original conceptualization of flexibility may have been mistaken, and non-autonomous mothers' inflexibility may instead be expressed in more behavioral similarities with each infant.

➢Interestingly, U/D mothers were very similar with each infant in many domains, and were more similar in interactions with each sibling than autonomous and non-autonomous mothers.