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# Neuroticism, Childhood Rejection, and Perceptions of Intrusive Parent-Child Interactions

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## Neuroticism, Childhood Rejection, and Perceptions of Intrusive Parent-Child Interactions

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According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973) individuals construct “internal working models” based on interactions they experienced with attachment figures early in development. These internal working models are representations used to guide expectations of the self, others, and relationships between the two. Internal working models based on childhood memories of parental rejection have found to be associated with avoidant behaviors later on in adulthood. According to Leerkes and Crockenberg (2006) women who recalled emotional rejection during childhood demonstrated less empathy for distressed infants and displayed more negative emotions in response to infant distress. These women were also more likely to report self-focused reactions such as avoidance, or a need to end the crying in order to reduce their own elevated levels of personal distress. The personality trait of neuroticism has also been associated with low emotional control and a reduced capacity to comfort others in distress (Belsky et al., 1995; Lundy & Skeel, 2009; Zeifman, 2003). Individuals who score high in neuroticism tend to demonstrate hypersensitivity to negative stimulation, and display more negative emotions towards others in distress (Lundy & Skeel, 2009; Zeifman, 2003). While a considerable amount of research has explored attachment styles in relation to internalized working models of parental behavior, and the personality trait of neuroticism, there is no current research investigating these representations in relation to how individuals perceive others’ interactions. The present research explores adults’ perceptions of parent-child interactions in relation to memories of parental rejection, personality traits (neuroticism, extraversion, and agreeableness), and depressive moods. It was hypothesized that negative parental representations would be associated with the personality trait neuroticism, lower empathetic concern, and higher ratings of irritation toward a child during ‘intrusive’ parent-child interactions.

**Procedure:** 203 (150 female and 53 male) undergraduates completed a background questionnaire, the *Parental Bonding Instrument* scale (Parker, Tuling, & Brown, 1979), *The Big Five* questionnaire (Goldberg, 1999), and the *Depressive Symptoms* scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). Participants also viewed four brief videotaped segments of ‘intrusive’ and ‘sensitive’ parent-child interactions. Following each segment participants reported their perceptions of the interaction.

**Results:** Regression analysis revealed that neuroticism predicted higher levels of personal distress ( $\beta = .49, p < .001$ ) and more negative childhood memories of maternal rejection ( $\beta = -.45, p < .001$ ). And the relationship between neuroticism and irritation during the intrusive interactions approached significance.