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The impact of mother-child interaction quality and cognitive abilities on children's self-concept and self-esteem

Markus Paulus^{a,*}, Maria Licata^b, Burkhard Gniewosz^c, Beate Sodian^a

^a Ludwig-Maximilian-Universität München, Munich, Germany

^b Technical University, Munich, Germany

^c Paris-Lodron-University Salzburg, Austria



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ABSTRACT

The current longitudinal study examined relations between different dimensions of mother-child interaction quality and children's multifaceted self-concept in $n = 150$ participants. Mothers' emotional availability was assessed when children were 7 months and 4 years old. Children's social and academic self-concept as well as their general self-worth were assessed at 8 years. Furthermore, we assessed children's and mother's cognitive functioning. Children's academic self-concept was predicted by their cognitive functioning, whereas children's social self-concept was exclusively predicted by their mothers' early sensitivity and non-hostility. Children's general self-worth was related to their mother's increasing sensitivity and structuring. Overall, the current study reveals developmental pathways between the different domains of mother-child interaction quality and the different facets of children's self-concept.

1. The impact of mother-child interaction quality and cognitive abilities on children's self-concept and self-esteem

The self-concept, that is, how people think about and evaluate themselves, plays an important role in child psychosocial and cognitive development. A positive self-concept has been related to a variety of developmental outcomes, inter alia psychological well-being, health development, social functioning, and academic achievements (for current review see [Harter, 2012](#); [Thompson, 2008](#)). The self-concept is a cognitive structure that comprises schemas or mental representations of the self that affect our interactions with the world and with others. Moreover, it has been suggested that the self-concept affects information processing by modulating a person's attention and memory for particular events and information (e.g., [Markus & Kitayama, 1991](#)). Understanding the development of the self-concept is thus of interest for obtaining a full picture of human cognitive development. Interestingly, classical developmental theories propose that the self-concept is not a unitary phenomenon, but is multifaceted and hierarchically structured ([Marsh & Shavelson, 1985](#); [Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976](#)). For example, [Harter \(1982\)](#) proposed that by middle childhood children's self-concept consists of five specific domains (for example, social competence and scholastic competence), and a distinct and more global self worth (or self-esteem) domain.

Given the significance of the self-concept for adaptive development, psychological research has been highly interested in investigating the developmental pathways that lead to a positive self-concept. Already in the early years of psychology, classical theories have proposed that the self-concept is a product of social interactions ([Cooley, 1902](#); [Mead, 1934](#)). These views have been extended in contemporary psychology (e.g., [Andersen & Chen, 2002](#); [Brummelman & Thomaes, 2017](#); [Orth, 2018](#); [Shraugher & Schoeneman, 1979](#)), and are mirrored in influential developmental theories. Most notably, attachment theory (e.g., [Bowlby, 1969](#),

* Corresponding author at: Developmental Psychology, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Leopoldstr. 13, 80802, Munich, Germany.
E-mail address: markus.paulus@lmu.de (M. Paulus).

1973) has suggested that through their interactions with significant others, young children form an internal working model, which includes a mental representation of the self (e.g., Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). That is, children's relationship experiences with their caregivers serve as a template through which they understand and evaluate themselves. A secure attachment relationship is thus supposed to lead to a positive internal working model of the self and its relationship to others. This proposal was supported by empirical studies demonstrating relations between attachment security and children's positive self-concept (e.g., Cassidy, 1988; Laible, Carlo, & Roesch, 2004; Verschueren, Marcoen, & Schoefs, 1996; for review see Thompson, 2008).

Whereas classical attachment theory focused on caregiver sensitivity as the central determinant of attachment development (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), recent research has expanded upon this original conceptualization. The construct of emotional availability (EA) has distinguished several dimensions of interaction quality (for reviews see Biringen, Derscheid, Vliegen, Closson, & Easterbrooks, 2014; Saunders, Kraus, Barone, & Biringen, 2015). With respect to the caregiver, there exist four dimensions: Sensitivity, structuring, non-intrusiveness, and non-hostility. Sensitivity focuses on genuine affect and emotional responsiveness, structuring refers the caregiver's ability to structure the interaction in the zone of proximal development, non-intrusiveness refers to the caregiver's tendency to follow the child's lead, whereas non-hostility is characterized by a lack of negativity. Empirical research has pointed to meaningful interindividual differences in parental emotional availability (e.g., Bornstein, Putnick, Heslington, Gini, & Suwalsky, 2008). Those differences in EA have been shown to be related to a number of developmental outcomes, inter alia language development, emotional regulation, Theory of Mind development, and social functioning (e.g., Biringen, Skillern, Mone, & Pianta, 2005; Howes & Hong, 2008; Licata et al., 2014; Licata, Kristen, & Sodian, 2016; Moreno, Klute, & Robinson, 2008; Taylor-Colls & Pasco Fearon, 2015).

It should be noted that attachment theory and the concept of caregiver sensitivity are an important basis of the EA framework: Caregiver sensitivity, i.e. the caregiver's prompt and adequate responses to the infant's signals, is viewed as basis for the development of a secure attachment. In addition to attachment theory, the EA framework has been influenced by other theories, such as Mahler's theory of an available figure "being there" in the background (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975) without necessarily responding in any way, as well as Emde's (1980) idea that emotions are a barometer of the caregiver-child relationship. Thus, EA is different from mere behavioral responsiveness, focusing on emotional expressions in the interaction. Furthermore, it is assumed that each individual contributes to the relationship quality, and that child and parent mutually influence one another (Sameroff, 2009). Whereas Ainsworth's sensitivity concept focuses on the adult, the EAS assume a stronger dyadic perspective. In sum, Ainsworth's concept of sensitivity is one part of the EAS, but the EA framework has a broader view on sensitivity and relationship quality, and focuses on emotions instead of behavioral responsiveness. Furthermore, the EAS have been developed for a wide age range. They are applicable from infancy to adolescence, since the emotional feedback loop between child and parent is central for the EA concept, regardless of the age of the child (Biringen et al., 2014). This makes them particularly suitable for longitudinal studies.

Importantly, although the EA dimensions are intercorrelated, they show specific relations with particular outcomes. For example, maternal sensitivity and structuring are predictive of lower aggression in the kindergarten years (Biringen et al., 2005). Parental hostility, but not parenting warmth mediated relations between maternal postnatal stress and later child well-being (Giallo, Cooklin, Wade, D'Esposito, & Nicholson, 2014). Maternal intrusiveness mediated the relation between teenage motherhood and child language development (Keown, Woodward, & Field, 2001). In addition, it has been shown that maternal intrusiveness at 12 months was negatively related to child language development at 2 years (Haabrekke et al., 2015). Taken together, the different dimensions of early child-caregiver interaction quality are differently related to social and cognitive developmental outcomes, stressing thus the fruitfulness of conceptualizing caregiver-child interaction quality as a multidimensional construct.

A multidimensional approach to caregiver-child relationship quality has the potential to advance and deepen our knowledge about parental influences on the development of the self-concept. More precisely, given that the self-concept is a multifaceted phenomenon consisting of independent dimensions, we have good reasons to assume that the different aspects of the self-concept have unique developmental precursors and pathways (Harter, 2012). Understanding the emergence of the self-concept requires therefore to disclose the unique developmental pathways that shape these different facets, and reveal commonalities and differences. Given the theoretical emphasis on parent-child interaction as the cradle of children's developing self, a multidimensional approach to caregiver quality can specify how different parental interaction characteristics affect children's self-concept. The current study aimed at addressing this issue.

In addition, as previous research focused on the question whether or not there are any relations between the child-caregiver relationship and children's self-concept, little is known about the developmental dynamics of this impact. Although some temporal stability in maternal characteristics has been reported, relations are mostly moderate indicating thus change over time (e.g., Bigelow et al., 2010; Biringen, Matheny, Bretherton, Renouf, & Sherman, 2000). In other words, the quality of caregiver-child relationship can change over time (for extensive discussions see Kuczynski, 2003), leading thus to the question of how the developmental dynamics of the child-caregiver relationship relates to children's developing self-concept.

2. The current study

Taken together, the current study was designed to examine the relation between child-caregiver interaction quality and children's self-concept in greater detail, and to shed light on the impact of developmental changes in parental emotional availability. We were specifically interested in exploring how the different facets of the child-caregiver relationship quality affect children's self-concept. In particular, we were interested in whether or not there are specific relations between particular child-caregiver relationship characteristics and the different domains of young children's self-concept. In addition, given the evidence of a specific impact of maternal intrusiveness on cognitive development (Keown et al., 2001), we explored whether a potential effect of maternal intrusiveness on

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