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Hostile-Helpless state of mind as further evidence of adult disorganized states of mind in neglecting families[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to assess disorganized states of mind in a sample of neglecting and at-risk of neglecting mothers using the recently developed Hostile-Helpless (HH) coding system (Lyons-Ruth et al., 2006) for the Adult Attachment Interview (Main & Goldwyn, 1998). The relation between HH states of mind and mothers' childhood traumas was also examined. Participants were 70 neglecting mothers and at-risk of neglecting mothers. Childhood traumas were assessed using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire. HH states of mind were coded from Adult Attachment Interview transcripts by two reliable coders. Results revealed a high prevalence of disorganized states of mind in this sample. Forty-five mothers were classified HH, representing 64% of the entire sample. Most mothers reported at least one form of childhood trauma, with a mean of 2.9 different forms of trauma. Mothers classified HH reported having been emotionally abused, sexually abused and physically neglected more frequently than non-HH mothers. There was no difference between neglecting and at-risk of neglect mothers on HH states of mind and childhood experiences of trauma. These findings are in line with theorization on maltreating mothers' psychological background and they provide further empirical support to the validation of the HH classification system with at-risk populations.

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Introduction

According to attachment theory, a disorganized state of mind with respect to attachment in a parent is related to a higher risk of difficulties in the parent-child relationship (Hesse, 2008; Main & Hesse, 1990). Traditionally, disorganized states of mind in adulthood are assessed through the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; Main & Goldwyn, 1998) using the Unresolved state of mind classification (U/d). The AAI is a widely used semi-structured interview documenting thoughts, feelings, and memories related to early experiences with caregivers and assessing adults' state of mind with respect to attachment relationships. During the AAI, adults showing slippage in their discourse when talking about either a specific loss or trauma

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experience are considered unresolved with respect to either loss or trauma. It has been theoretically proposed and empirically demonstrated that these unresolved experiences interfere with normative parenting (e.g., Abrams, Rifkin, & Hesse, 2006; Madigan, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, Moran, Pederson, & Benoit, 2006; Schuengel, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van IJzendoorn, 1999).

Given these findings, one may expect U/d state of mind to be particularly prevalent among highly dysfunctional families, such as those in which there is child maltreatment. Surprisingly, however, only a handful of studies have assessed caregivers' state of mind in maltreating families, where childhood disorganized attachment is widely documented. Frigerio, Costantino, Ceppi, and Barone (2013) conducted a study involving three different samples among which eight were maltreating mothers and seven were mothers at high risk for maltreatment. Out of these 15 mothers, only 3 maltreating mothers (38%) and 2 high-risk mothers (29%) were classified as U/d with respect to loss or trauma. In another study involving 23 mothers for whom child neglect was substantiated, Lindhiem, Bernard, and Dozier (2011) reported only 3 (13%) mothers classified as U/d. The low rates of U/d state of mind in maltreating caregivers appear to challenge current thinking about the relation between this state of mind and dysfunctional parenting. In comparison, prevalence of U/d state of mind is estimated at 18% in normal populations, 32% in high-risk samples (e.g., low SES or adolescent parents) and 43% in other clinical samples (e.g., depressed mothers, borderline personality, criminal offenders; Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 2009). Moreover, the relatively low rates of U/d found in maltreating samples are particularly surprising considering the great proportion of maltreating parents (up to 81%) reporting childhood trauma experiences (Cort, Toth, Cerulli, & Rogosch, 2011; Éthier, Couture, & Lacharité, 2004). Thus, there appears to be a mismatch between the relational difficulties of maltreating parents, their own past traumatic experiences and the sensitivity of the U/d classification to tap into disorganized states of mind with regard to attachment.

The purpose of this study is to examine the contribution of a newly developed classification of adult disorganized states of mind, namely the Hostile-Helpless state of mind (HH; Lyons-Ruth, Yellin, Melnick, & Atwood, 2005), to further investigate disorganized states of mind among neglectful parents. According to Lyons-Ruth et al. (2005), HH state of mind expands the current concept of U/d state of mind and provides a useful alternative for more accurately identifying disorganized states of mind in high-risk samples.

The Hostile-Helpless state of mind coding system

The Hostile-Helpless state of mind coding system for the AAI was developed in order to capture disorganized attachment states of mind that would result from childhood relational trauma (Lyons-Ruth et al., 2005). This new parallel system is distinct and independent from the traditional Main and Goldwyn's (1998) AAI coding system. The HH coding system is largely based on the clinical concepts of dissociation and splitting, which are psychopathological processes which may accompany or follow traumatic experiences. The system is aimed at capturing globally contradictory and unintegrated mental representations of caregivers often observed in adults severely abused or neglected in childhood. According to Lyons-Ruth et al. (2005), while the Main and Goldwyn's coding system "classifies participants as U when they show lapses of monitoring of reason or discourse in regard to experiences of loss or trauma, the coding system for pervasively unintegrated HH states of mind examines discourse patterns throughout the whole protocol regardless of relevance to particular experiences" (Lyons-Ruth et al., 2005; p. 7).

A Hostile-Helpless state of mind is present when the individual displays signs in his/her discourse of conflicting or extremely negative thoughts and emotions toward a primary caregiver, while also identifying with this caregiver (Lyons-Ruth et al., 2005). Many adults with a Hostile-Helpless state of mind are believed to display a mix of hostile and helpless features representing a breakdown in organized strategies of attachment (Lyons-Ruth, Melnick, Yellin, & Atwood 2006). However, some individuals may be polarized toward either a punitive (hostile) or a caregiving (helpless) stance. Individuals with a hostile state of mind tend to depict their caregivers as malevolent, while also showing indications in their discourse that they identify with them. Also, when they talk about past trauma, they may focus on reporting the facts while leaving out emotional or painful content. Adults in the hostile range may also idealize malevolent caregivers, while also displaying anger or a desire of vengeance and control toward them.

Individuals with a helpless state of mind, on the other hand, are more likely to identify with a helpless attachment figure and to report having displayed a caregiving attitude toward them during their childhood. They may struggle to develop a better understanding of their past relationships with the caregiver, without achieving a coherent representation of these relationships. They may also depict themselves as victims or be engaged in abusive relationships with others and be overwhelmed by feelings of fear and guilt.

The HH coding system is increasingly being used in research with clinical samples. In a longitudinal study involving 45 low-income mothers and their child, Lyons-Ruth et al. (2005) found that 51% of mothers met criteria for Hostile-Helpless state of mind. Moreover, in that sample, HH state of mind was found to be related to maternal history of childhood trauma, to the adoption of atypical behaviors toward children (e.g., withdrawal, negative-intrusive behaviors, role confusion), and to infant disorganization (assessed at 18 months). In another study conducted with 12 women with borderline personality disorder (BPD) and 20 women with dysthymia, Lyons-Ruth and colleagues (Lyons-Ruth, Melnick, Patrick, & Hobson, 2007) found that 100% of BPD and 55% of dysthymic participants were classified as HH. Results of this study also indicated strong relations between Hostile-Helpless state of mind and borderline phenomenology. In another study, Finger (2006) compared attachment state of mind of 62 substance-abusing Afro-American mothers and 87 matched control low-income mothers.

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