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Intersubjectivity and relational health in mother and child attachment dimensions

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Abstract

One major factor influencing the mental and relational health is the attachment style, structured in early mother-infant/toddler interaction. Starting from this idea, the present study was conducted on 54 subjects (27 mothers and their children), mothers aged between 24 and 43 (mean 32 years), all from urban areas, and children (infants and toddlers) aged 14 to 35 months (mean 22.15 months). The variables described in the hypothesis (*mother's attachment dimensions* and *child's attachment dimensions*) have been first correlated, and then the moderating effect of label variables *the child's current main caregiver* and *kindergarten commencement* was calculated for the relation between the two. Results show that there is a significant positive correlation only between the *couple anxiety* dimension of the mother's attachment and the *cooperation* dimension of her child's attachment; there are no statistically significant correlations between the *avoidance* dimension of the mother's in-couple attachment and the child's attachment dimensions; the variable *child's current main caregiver* does not play a moderating role in the relation between the mother's in-couple attachment *anxiety* and the child's attachment dimensions, but it moderates the relation between mother's attachment *avoidance* dimension, the *distress at separation*, and the *demanding/provocative behavior*, as child's attachment dimensions; *kindergarten commencement* does not play a moderating role in the relation between the mother's in-couple attachment dimension and the dimensions of her child's attachment.

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1. Introduction

According to the theory of John Bowlby (1980, 1988), *the internal working models* are an essential component of the attachment style. They are internalized on the basis of the quality of the child's experience with their primary

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attachment figure, and will be employed in future significant relationships. In what follows we will briefly highlight the specific of the reality internalized by children, for each of the attachment styles described in the literature. Therefore, being formed early in a warm and responsive relationship with the significant adult, *secure attachment* acts as a protective factor for children (Andreassen and Fletcher, 2007). Specifically, he internalizes his self-confidence and the ability to adapt to new and challenging situations, using the parent as secure base from which to explore the environment freely, without interruptions caused by anger or fear (Grossman, Grossman, and Zimmerman, 1999, as cited in Andreassen and Fletcher, 2007).

Insecure attachment styles occur when the parent is unable to calm the child, due to his emotional unavailability or inability of decoding the child's needs. Here we are talking about the *ambivalent* (or *anxious/resistant*) style and the *avoidant* style (Lamb, 2000; Main, 2000). If the parent is unpredictable and inconsistent in their responses to the child's needs, the latter cannot rely on the availability of the attachment figure and will develop an *ambivalent* attachment. These children will manifest a low degree of independence in exploring the environment, due to anxiety of being away from the parent (Andreassen and Fletcher, 2007). Rejective or hostile answers or parent indifference lead to the development of an *avoidant* attachment style in children. The child can learn to avoid others and deny their own needs, and thus appear independent. But this is only the result of the fact that he has not learned to depend on others (Lamb, 2000; Main, 2000).

Recent research (Main, 2000, as cited in Andreassen and Fletcher, 2007) have shown that *disorganized/disoriented* attachment style appears in children subjected to abuse or neglect by the parent. These children are hypersensitive to abuse, and appear disoriented or confused in the presence of their parent. They express a combination of strategies specific to the ambivalent and rejective styles, having moments when they try to please the parent, immediately followed by moments when they show anger or rejection towards them.

Back to internal working models (Bowlby, 1973) related to attachment styles, we have to stress that they are constantly reviewed and updated. Therefore, their impact on the psychosocial functioning of a child of a certain age may depend on the security of the representations developed within that period (Thompson, 1999).

Children's early representations of their own experiences, of others and of the nature of relationships, are outlined in the context of the discourse *shared with others* (Nelson, 1993). In this respect, the influence of the main caregiver upon the child's attachment structure works in 2 ways: through the quality of the care given and through the interpretation of events offered during discussions with children. The security or insecurity of children's representations of relational experiences are thus generated and maintained (Thompson, 1999).

In this context, parents' behavior has been identified by a number of researches as, on the one hand, the link variable between adult attachment and child attachment; the securely attached children having sensitive mothers who respond promptly to their needs (Ainsworth et al. 1978; Bowlby, 1988). On the other hand, the studies that investigated the link between children's attachment to parents and partners' mutual attachment within couples (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007) – possibly linked to the concept of adult attachment in general –, questioned the existence of this link due to the fact that the significant association found between the two forms of parental attachment was low (Treboux, Crowell and Waters, 2004) or absent (Bartholomew and Shaver, 1998).

Our paper's aim is to grasp, starting from these data, the ways in which the levels of mothers' (as primary attachment figures, very often mentioned in the literature) attachment within the couple may be related to child attachment levels, between the ages of 1 and 3. Furthermore, we will observe if and how the relationship between variables may vary under the influence of some factors that influence the mother-child interaction, such as *changing the predominant caregiver* (at the time of the investigation), or *kindergarten commencement*.

In this context, our research aimed to test the following general hypotheses: 1) It is assumed that there is a significant correlation between the mother's attachment style dimensions and the child's attachment style dimensions. 2) The label variables "the person who cares for the child now", and "kindergarten commencement" play a moderating role in the relation between the mother's and the child's attachment dimensions.

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