



# Repetitive thinking about the mother during distress moderates the link between children's attentional breadth around the mother and depressive symptoms in middle childhood



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## ABSTRACT

It has been suggested that an increased attentional focus on the mother should be maladaptive in middle childhood. However, the effect of a more narrow attentional field around the mother may depend on the mother-child relationship. The current study tested whether a more narrow attentional field around the mother is mainly maladaptive for children who tend to think repetitively about their mother (RTm) during distress. More specifically, it investigates whether RTm during distress provides the context in which an increased attentional focus on the mother is linked to depressive symptoms in middle childhood. RTm was measured using a self-report questionnaire. The breadth of children's attentional field around the mother was measured with the Attentional Breadth Task. This computer task assesses the extent to which children have a more narrow attentional field around the mother compared to unfamiliar women. Results of the current study ( $N = 157$ ) support the hypothesis that 9–12 year old children who have a more narrow attentional field around the mother and who at the same time report more RTm during distress, have more depressive symptoms.

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## 1. Introduction

There is increasing research focusing on vulnerability factors involved in the development of depressive symptoms, one of the leading (mental) health problems in youth (Cuijpers & Smit, 2002; World Health Organization [WHO], 2014; Wulsin, Vaillant, & Wells, 1999). Depressive symptoms become more prevalent from middle childhood onwards (Hammen & Rudolph, 2003; Weller & Weller, 2000) and are, among other factors, influenced by the quality of the relationship with mother (Wenar & Kerig, 2005). Different relationship characteristics can contribute uniquely to children's depressive symptoms, such as children's overdependence in interactions with mother (Allen et al., 2006; Allen, Hauser, Eickholt, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994). Children are considered to be overly

dependent on mother when they display an elevated need to remain close to mother at the expense of healthy exploration in non-threatening circumstances (Cassidy, 1994). The same is true when they overly rely on mother during challenges which their cognitive maturation should allow them to autonomously solve (Mayseless, 2005). It has been argued that overdependence can for example be observed as children's increased tendency to focus their attention on the mother (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994; Main, 2000). This is proposed to be part of a maladaptive relational strategy on which children rely to regulate distress (Bowlby, 1973; Cassidy, 1994). Especially in middle childhood an increased attentional focus on the mother has always been considered to be a developmental risk factor because in this age period becoming autonomous is a crucial developmental task (Koehn & Kerns, 2015; Mayseless, 2005). However, recent research, in which the increased attentional focus on the mother was measured as the breadth of children's attentional field around mother, suggests that children's relational context determines whether this focus is maladaptive (Bosmans, Koster, Vandevivere, Braet, & De Raedt, 2013; Claes, De Raedt, Van de Walle, & Bosmans, 2016). Identifying possible moderators in the relationship between an increased attentional focus

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on the mother and depressive symptoms is fundamental to improve theory and inform clinical interventions. The current study aims to investigate whether this relationship is moderated by children's repetitive thinking about their mother during distress (see Fig. 1). These concepts and this research question will be explained in the following paragraphs.

### 1.1. An increased attentional focus on the mother and the breadth of children's attentional field around the mother

An increased attentional focus on the mother has been studied at different ages in the context of attachment research. In infancy, it can be observed in some insecurely attached infants' behavior as heightened monitoring of the mother and increased looking at the mother in proximity of a stranger (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Cassidy & Berlin, 1994; Main, 2000). Throughout middle childhood, attachment behavior becomes less overt and observable (Mayseless, 2005). Instead, the attachment system is supposed to operate increasingly on the level of covert, cognitive processes, such as cognitive schemas and scripts, cognitive styles and strategies, and information processing like the increased attentional focus on the mother (Bosmans & Kerns, 2015; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). In an attempt to operationalize an increased focus on the mother in middle childhood, Bosmans, Braet, Koster, and De Raedt (2009) measured the breadth of children's attentional field around their mother. This refers to the amount of peripheral information a child encodes when the caregiver is presented as a stimulus centrally in the attentional field (Bosmans et al., 2009; Easterbrook, 1959). In pre-attentive stages of processing (measurable at stimulus presentations of 34 ms) the motivational or emotional relevance of the mother can narrow this attentional field. This is called the attentional narrowing effect and can be compared to tunnel vision (Derryberry & Tucker, 1994; Easterbrook, 1959).

In middle childhood, normally developing children direct their attention increasingly away from mother in favor of exploration, in order to promote autonomy and other developmental tasks in adolescence (Koehn & Kerns, 2015; Mayseless, 2005). In contrast, theory proposes that children may be increasingly at risk of displaying depressive symptoms when they maintain the attentional focus on the mother. This focus could reduce cognitive capacity needed to succeed in adolescent developmental tasks (Heylen et al., 2015). First, it is supposed to impair their ability to explore (Bosmans, Dujardin, Field, Saleminck, & Vasey, 2015; Dujardin, Bosmans, De Raedt, & Braet, 2015). Second, it is supposed to intensify distress about potential lack of maternal support (Cassidy, 1994; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002).

Research on the attentional narrowing effect found first indications that a more narrow attentional field around the mother is

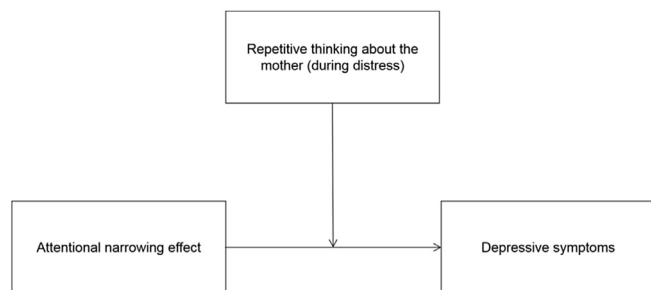
a maladaptive feature of the mother-child relationship in middle childhood as it has been linked with reduced support seeking behavior during distress (e.g., Bosmans, Braet, Heylen, & De Raedt, 2015). However, additional research suggested that, instead of being a uniformly maladaptive feature, the effect of a more narrow attentional field around the mother on children's adjustment depends on how children perceive the relationship with their mother. For example, it was repeatedly demonstrated that a more narrow attentional field around the mother can be found in children with high as well as low levels of trust in maternal support and that these levels predicted the nature of its effect (Bosmans et al., 2013; Claes et al., 2016). More specifically, only when individuals had a more narrow attentional field around the mother, trust in maternal support predicted the prevalence of emotional and behavioral problems in middle childhood (replicated in two samples in Bosmans et al., 2013), and non-suicidal self-injury in young adults (Claes et al., 2016). So, children with a more narrow attentional field and at the same time less trust in maternal support had more emotional and behavioral problems whereas children with a more narrow attentional field and at the same more trust in maternal support had less emotional and behavioral problems. Bosmans et al. (2013) explained the finding as follows:

This suggests that a strong attentional focus on mother when she is expected to be unavailable could reflect maladaptive rumination, while the same focus on a mother that is considered as available might guide children to seek her adaptive support more easily. (p.836)

This moderation effect might on the one hand reflect the fact that an increased attentional focus on the mother is a protective factor for children who are confident that they can seek their mother's support during distress. This hypothesis is in line with other areas of attentional narrowing research where awareness increases that the meaning of cognitive narrowing and broadening depends on the motivational goal reflected by the stimulus in the center of the attentional field (for a review, see Kaplan, Van Damme, & Levine, 2012). More specifically, they found that whether a more narrow cognitive focus is elicited depends on the relevance of the stimulus for attaining a goal (or prevent a loss), independently from the positive or negative valence of the stimulus. On the other hand, these authors proposed that an increased attentional focus on the mother could be a risk factor for children who perceive their mother as unavailable during distress and, therefore, have to rely on maladaptive regulation strategies. So, whether an increased attentional focus on the mother is a risk or a protective factor might be determined by children's relational strategies to regulate distress. Given this line of reasoning on conditional effects of attentional narrowing outcomes, the current study decided to directly test the hypothesis that children's repetitive thinking about the mother during distress moderates the association between attentional narrowing around the mother and depressive symptoms.

### 1.2. Children's repetitive thinking about the mother

However, the previous studies did not allow drawing such conclusions because they relied on a measure of trust in maternal support that did not directly reflect children's relational strategies to regulate distress. Interestingly, Van de Walle, Bijttebier, De Raedt, Heylen, and Bosmans (2014, September) and Van de Walle, Bijttebier, Braet, and Bosmans (2016) investigated in two independent samples whether children's repetitive thinking about the mother (RTm) during distress could be a mechanism in the link between less trust in maternal support and depressive symptoms.



**Fig. 1.** Conceptual model of the interaction between the attentional narrowing effect and repetitive thinking about the mother (during distress) in the prediction of depressive symptoms.

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