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## Review

# Great expectations? Do mothers' and fathers' prenatal thoughts and feelings about the infant predict parent-infant interaction quality? A meta-analytic review

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on data gathered from 14 studies involving a total of 1862 mothers and fathers, this meta-analysis reviews the measures that are used to tap into thoughts and feelings about the unborn infant during pregnancy and examines links between these prenatal measures and parent-child interaction quality. Questionnaire scores for parental-fetal attachment and interview ratings of expectant parents' representations of their infant showed modest but robust associations with observed parent-child interaction quality. Moderator analyses showed that these associations were significantly stronger for mothers than for fathers. Key lessons for future research include the need for greater consistency in study measures, sample diversity and the examination of associations with child outcomes.

## Introduction

Attachment, defined as infants' adaptive propensity to seek comfort and protection from a familiar caregiver when they are alarmed or unwell, has long been recognized as an important predictor of children's development and adjustment (Bowlby, 1969; Sroufe, 2005). Using standardized observational paradigms such as Ainsworth's strange situation (1970), researchers have identified three main profiles of infant attachment: secure (e.g., seeks and accepts comfort), insecure-resistant (e.g., seeks yet resists comfort) or insecure-avoidant (e.g., absence of help-seeking behaviour). Variation in parental sensitivity, defined as the ability to notice, interpret and respond in a timely and appropriate manner to children's signals (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974), is thought to underpin these contrasts in infant attachment. In contrast, parental displays of frightening or atypical behaviour are thought to lead to a pattern of disorganised attachment in a fourth group of children (e.g., Duschinsky, 2018; van Ijzendoorn, Schuengel, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1999). In a further expansion of the field, researchers have also examined parents' *representations* of their infants, with a particular focus on two related constructs: (i) mind-mindedness, which refers to parents' propensity to see their children as individuals with their own minds (Meins, 1997); and (ii) and reflective function, which refers to parents' ability to reflect upon the internal states that govern their own and their children's behaviour (Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Moran, & Higgitt, 1991).

Importantly, this shift in focus from parent behaviour to parental representations enables predictors of parent-child relationship quality to be examined from as early as the prenatal period. This is an exciting prospect for fostering infant development and adjustment because pregnancy provides a valuable window of opportunity for delivering programmes to support new parents (Sadler et al., 2013). With this goal in mind, researchers have used diverse interviews and questionnaires to examine whether expectant parents' thoughts and feelings about their unborn infant might contribute to early variation in parental sensitivity. However, the

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findings from this field have yet to be synthesised. To address this gap in the current study, we first summarise the different interview and questionnaire measures available to tap into expectant parents' thoughts and feelings about the unborn infant. Next, we outline some of the observational parenting measures used in studies tracking participants across the transition to parenthood. Following this, we aim to provide a quantitative summary of effects from studies adopting similar methodologies and possible moderation effects (Rosenthal, 1984) by conducting a meta-analysis of the strength of associations between prenatal thoughts and feelings about the unborn infant and observed parenting quality in the first years of life.

### Assessing expectant parents' thoughts and feelings about their unborn infants

Fonagy, Steele, Moran, Steele, and Higgitt (1993) found that expectant mothers' representations of their own caregivers predicted their infants' attachment security at age 12 and 18 months. Building on this seminal study, other investigators (e.g., Korja et al., 2010) have examined whether parents' representations of their children (rather than their own caregivers) might provide a more direct predictor of the quality of parent-child interactions and child outcomes. To this end, researchers have developed standardised interviews, such as the Working Model of the Child Interview (WMCI; Zeanah, Benoit, & Barton, 1986) and the Parent Development Interview (PDI; Slade, Grienemberger, Bernbach, Levy, & Locker, 2002). Here we focus on the WMCI as an adapted version of this interview has been used with expectant parents (Benoit, Parker, & Zeanah, 1997).

In the WMCI the interviewer asks parents to draw on past and present experiences of their child's behaviour and personality to describe their thoughts and feelings and expectations of the child in the future. The content of these narratives is then coded according to several distinct dimensions including: richness of parental perceptions, openness to change, intensity of their involvement, coherence, sensitivity during caregiving and acceptance. Researchers also code the predominant affective tone of the representation and the extent to which the narrative is critical or worried. Together, these content- and affect-based coding systems enable researchers to categorise parents' representations as balanced, disengaged, or distorted, as described below.

Parents who demonstrate clear enjoyment of their relationship with the child, coupled with an appreciation of the child as a distinct individual and a recognition that their views of the child may change over time, are classified as having a balanced representation of their child. In contrast, parents who convey a lack of both emotion and content and suggest that they do not see themselves as playing an influential role in their children's development are classified as having a disengaged representation of their child. Parents who offer incomplete or inconsistent descriptions of the child or the parent-child relationship, use contradictory or confusing statements or show either a narrow focus on their own concerns or idealized descriptions of their children are classified as having a distorted representation of their child. Typically, these three groups map on to the three main infant attachment classifications. That is, infants of parents with balanced representations are typically securely attached, whilst infants of parents with disengaged representations typically show avoidant attachment and infants of parents with distorted representations typically show resistant attachment. Importantly, parent behaviour is thought to underpin this mapping between parental representations and infant attachment. For example, parents with a balanced representation by definition see their infants as individuals with distinct and changeable experiences and so are more likely than other parents to act in a sensitive manner (e.g., by looking for cues about their infants' intentions and feelings). Conversely, parents who provide disengaged representations of their infants appear disinclined to attend to their infants' cues and parents who provide distorted representations of their infants find it difficult to read or respond to their infants' cues (Korja et al., 2010; Schechter et al., 2006; Sokolowski, Hans, Bernstein, & Cox, 2007).

In a study that adapted the WMCI for use in pregnancy, Benoit et al. (1997) found mothers' representations were typically stable over the transition to parenthood. For example, 89% of mothers with balanced prenatal representations also provided balanced representations during postnatal interviews. Likewise, 85% of mothers with unbalanced prenatal representations also showed unbalanced representations at 12 months. Expectant parents' representations of their unborn infant were also meaningfully related to attachment classification from the strange situation at 12 months (i.e., 91% of mothers with balanced representations had infants who were classified as securely attached). Changes from unbalanced representations during pregnancy to postnatal balanced representations were associated with lower levels of depression, a stable partner relationship and higher family incomes (Vreeswijk, Maas, & van Bakel, 2012).

Another research tool that has been used to elicit parents' representation of children is the Five-Minute Speech Sample (FMSS), a measure that is both much quicker to administer and code than the WMCI and widely used in the clinical literature (Sher-Censor, 2015; Weston, Hawes, & Pasalich, 2017). Traditionally used in adult psychopathology research (Magana et al., 1986), researchers are increasingly using the FMSS to measure parent-child dynamics across a variety of age ranges, including expressed emotion (Magana et al., 1986), parent attributions (Bullock & Dishion, 2004), warmth and criticism (Caspi et al., 2004; Daley, Sonuga-Barke, & Thompson, 2003). Indeed, capitalizing on the potential of the FMSS to substitute for the WMCI, Sher-Censor and Yates (2010) adapted the WMCI coding scheme for use with the FMSS. Weston et al. (2017) examined coding schemes that focus on four different dimensions from the FMSS to assess the strength of their association with observed parent behaviours and parent-child interaction quality. The most widely used of these four dimensions was expressed emotion ( $k = 12$ ), which assesses the extent to which parental talk is overtly critical, hostile and indicative of an emotionally over-involved relationship. Associations with observed positive and negative parent behaviours ranged in strength from small to large but were mainly restricted to mid- to late-childhood (Weston et al., 2017). This is a significant gap as in the first few years of life 'emotional over-involvement' may be normative rather than pathological (Peris & Miklowitz, 2015). Thus, infancy studies that adopt the FMSS should focus on constructs that are developmentally appropriate to this period. Importantly, the simplicity and open-ended nature of the FMSS means that it can be easily adapted to the prenatal setting and so offers a less time-consuming alternative to the prenatal version of the WMCI. Given the growth in use of the FMSS, we added the parental constructs commonly assessed with the FMSS (noted above) to the search terms used to identify studies

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