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The impact of maternal characteristics, infant temperament and contextual factors on maternal responsiveness to infant



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ABSTRACT

Postnatal maternal depressive symptoms are consistently associated with impairments in maternal attunement (i.e., maternal responsiveness and bonding). There is a growing body of literature examining the impact of maternal cognitive factors (e.g., rumination) on maternal attunement and mood. However, little research has examined the role of infant temperament and maternal social support in this relationship. This study investigated the hypothesis that rumination would mediate (1) the relationship between depressive symptoms and attunement and (2) the relationship between social support and attunement. We further predicted that infant temperament would moderate these relationships, such that rumination would demonstrate mediating effects on attunement when infant difficult temperament was high, but not low. Two hundred and three mothers completed measures on rumination, depressive symptoms, attunement, perceived social support and infant temperament. Rumination mediated the effect of postnatal maternal depressive mood on maternal self-reported responsiveness to the infant when infants were low, but not high, in negative temperament. When infants had higher negative temperament, there were direct relationships between maternal depressive symptoms, social support and maternal self-reported responsiveness to the infant. This study is limited by its cross-sectional and correlational nature and the use of self-report measures to assess a mother's awareness of her infant needs and behaviours, rather than observational measures of maternal sensitivity. These findings suggest potentially different pathways to poor maternal responsiveness than those expected and provide new evidence about the contexts in which maternal cognitive factors, such as rumination, may impact on the mother–infant relationship.

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1. Introduction

Maternal attunement to the infant encompasses maternal bonding with the infant and the quality with which mothers are attentive, sensitive, and responsive to their infant's cues (Legerstee, Markova, & Fisher, 2007). Attunement has been consistently linked to positive child outcomes such as attachment security, language acquisition, and maturity of object play (Bigelow, MacLean, & Proctor, 2004; Bigelow et al., 2010; Tamis-LeMonda & Bornstein, 2002) and inversely related to negative maternal emotional characteristics such as depression (Field, 2010). Attunement has also been shown to mediate

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the relationship between maternal depression and negative cognitive and behavioural child outcomes (see [Grace, Evindar, & Stewart, 2003](#)). However, little research has examined specific maternal cognitive mechanisms (e.g. rumination, dysfunctional attitudes) associated with maternal depression that may drive poor maternal attunement ([Barnum, Woody, & Gibb, 2013](#); [Müller, Teismann, Havemann, Michalak, & Seehagen, 2013](#); [Stein et al., 2012](#)). Further, it is unclear how infant temperament and contextual factors such as social support are related to maternal cognitive processes, and the impact these may have on the mother's ability to attend, and sensitively respond to her infant. This is important because a better understanding of the factors affecting specific cognitive processes that impact on maternal attunement to her infant may provide clinicians with distinct targets for intervention. In this study we examine the role of maternal rumination in maternal depressive mood and maternal attunement.

1.1. *Rumination, infant temperament and social support*

In the broader depression literature, there is extensive correlational, prospective, and experimental evidence linking rumination, a repetitive style of thinking that “focuses an individual's attention on their depressive symptoms and on the implications of these symptoms” ([Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991, p. 569](#)), with the onset, severity and maintenance of depression ([Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008](#)). Studies have demonstrated that rumination magnifies existing negative emotions and elaborates negative cognitions ([Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995](#); [Watkins, 2008](#)). As such, rumination may be an important factor involved in maternal depression and attunement, involving a preoccupation with personal concerns, less sensitivity to the external environment, and potentially focusing attention away from infant behavioural and emotional cues, and biasing attention towards negative stimuli ([Stein et al., 2010](#)).

In support of this notion, there is evidence that rumination has an important role in interpersonal functioning, with emerging support for the impact of rumination on the mother–infant relationship ([Abbott & Rapee, 2004](#); [Edwards, Rapee, & Franklin, 2003](#); [Lundh & Sperling, 2002](#)). These effects may be especially strong when the individual lacks a broader network of buffering social support ([Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 1999](#); [O'Mahen, Flynn, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2010](#)). In a recent prospective study, antenatal rumination, as assessed by the Perseverative Thinking Measure ([Müller et al., 2013](#)), predicted lower feelings of self-reported bonding with the infant at 8 weeks postpartum. In an experimental study, mothers with Major Depression who were induced to ruminate versus distract demonstrated a trend towards reduced responsiveness with their infants ([Stein et al., 2012](#)). However, there is less research examining broader infant-specific and contextual factors in the mother–infant relationship that may affect the impact of rumination on maternal attunement.

Infant temperament may have a significant role on the relationship between rumination and maternal attunement. There is evidence from numerous studies supporting a direct relationship between infant temperament and maternal attunement throughout the first postpartum year (e.g. [Kivijärvi, Räihä, Kaljonen, Tamminen, & Piha, 2005](#); [Seifer, Schiller, Sameroff, Resnick, & Riordan, 1996](#)) with negative affectivity being implicated as a particularly important infant behavioural index ([Austin, Hadzi-Pavlovic, Leader, Saint, & Parker, 2005](#); [Pesonen, Räikkönen, Strandberg, & Järvenpää, 2005](#); [Tikotzky, Chambers, Gaylor, & Manber, 2010](#)). Although negative infant temperament can be challenging for most parents, both self-report and laboratory observations of mother–infant interactions have shown that maternal attunement to infants with difficult temperaments is especially problematic when the mother is also suffering with postnatal depression ([Pauli-Pott, Mertesacker, Bade, Bauer, & Beckmann, 2000](#)). The stress caused by negative infant temperament may therefore create particular parenting contexts in which rumination is more likely to occur, and this may be especially true when the parent is suffering from postnatal depression.

As there is considerable research demonstrating that both instrumental and emotional support play an important buffering role against the stress associated with negative infant temperament ([Crockenberg, 1981](#)) and postnatal depression (see [Beck, 2001](#) for a review), we also expected that social support may also influence the interplay of infant temperament, maternal rumination and depressive mood. This is further supported in research demonstrating that social support prospectively buffers the effects of rumination on depressed mood ([O'Mahen et al., 2010](#)). As such, we predicted that mothers with high social support would have better maternal attunement, even when they had babies with difficult temperaments and were high in rumination.

1.2. *The present study*

We proposed that in the context of depressive symptoms, rumination may be related with poorer maternal attunement towards an infant with a difficult temperament. Two subtypes of rumination have been identified in a factor-analysis by [Treyner, Gonzalez, and Nolen-Hoeksema \(2003\)](#). Reflection is “a purposeful turning inward to engage in cognitive problem solving to alleviate one's depressive symptoms” ([Treyner et al., 2003, p. 256](#)). This is in contrast to brooding rumination, a passive comparison of one's situation with some unachieved standards (e.g. “thinking about a recent situation, wishing it had gone better”, p. 256), which has been associated with more depression both concurrently and longitudinally ([Treyner et al., 2003](#)). We examined how both brooding and reflective rumination were related to maternal attunement to the infant.

Consistent with previous literature, we expected that postnatal depressive symptoms would be negatively associated with maternal self-reported attunement with the infant. We also predicted that infant temperament would moderate this relationship. We hypothesized that postnatal depressive symptoms would be inversely related to maternal self-reported attunement with the infant when infant negative temperament was high, but not when infant negative temperament was

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