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## Maternal attachment is differentially associated with mother–child reminiscing among maltreating and nonmaltreating families



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### ABSTRACT

In the current investigation, we examined associations between maternal attachment and the way that mothers and children discuss past emotional experiences (i.e., reminiscing) among 146 maltreating and 73 nonmaltreating mothers and their 3- to 6-year-old children. Recent studies demonstrate that maltreating mothers engage in less elaborative reminiscing compared with nonmaltreating mothers. To further explicate the nature of reminiscing among maltreating families, we examined maternal *and* child contributions to reminiscing, their interrelations, and associations with maternal attachment among dyads from maltreating and nonmaltreating families. Maternal attachment is theoretically and empirically associated with mother–child reminiscing, and an insecure maternal attachment style was hypothesized to exacerbate poor elaborative reminiscing among maltreating families. Mothers and children reminisced about four emotional experiences. Maternal attachment was measured with the Experience in Close Relationships–Revised questionnaire. Mothers and children from maltreating families engaged in less elaborative and emotion-rich reminiscing compared with nonmaltreating dyads. Maternal attachment anxiety was negatively associated with maternal elaborative reminiscing, but only among nonmaltreating mothers. Mother–child reminiscing among dyads with nonmaltreating and low attachment anxiety mothers was highly collaborative; whereas reminiscing among dyads with maltreating and high attachment anxiety mothers was less reciprocal. Our findings largely support communicative perspectives of attachment theory

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and also indicate that maternal attachment is differentially associated with mother–child reminiscing among maltreating and non-maltreating families.

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## Introduction

Substantial theoretical and empirical evidence demonstrates that discussions between mothers and their children about past emotional experiences (i.e., reminiscing) are crucial for facilitating children's development in cognitive and socioemotional domains such as autobiographical memory and emotional knowledge (Fivush, 2011; Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Sociocultural perspectives of autobiographical memory and socioemotional development posit that how mothers reminisce with their children is critical for fostering children's understanding of the form and function of narratives and how to label, explain, and eventually manage their emotions (Fivush et al., 2006; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Evidence from cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental studies suggests that when mothers engage their children in highly elaborative and emotion-rich reminiscing by embellishing on details, asking open-ended questions, confirming child responses, and discussing emotions, children have more detailed, coherent, and accurate accounts of their experiences (Haden, Ornstein, Rudek, & Cameron, 2009; Leichtman et al., 2017; Newcombe & Reese, 2004; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993) and greater emotional knowledge (Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991; Laible, 2004, 2011; Van Bergen, Salmon, Dadds, & Allen, 2009) compared with children with mothers who reminisce in a less elaborative and emotion-rich manner. Reminiscing about negative experiences (as opposed to reminiscing about positive experiences) tends to be richer in emotional content and is particularly important for children's socioemotional development (Laible, 2011; Sales, Fivush, & Peterson, 2003).

Although extensive empirical evidence supports sociocultural perspectives of cognitive and socioemotional development (see Fivush, 2011, for a review), many gaps in the literature remain. More contemporary empirical questions include examining why mothers adopt certain reminiscing styles and whether children are socialized to recount experiences and discuss emotions differentially in diverse family contexts (Fivush & Sales, 2006; Laible, 2011). Because reminiscing about the past is a social activity that generally serves the purpose of fostering and maintaining relationships between children and their mothers (Kulkofsky & Koh, 2009), the quality of the parent–child relationship, the emotional climate of the family, and maternal internal representations of relationships should influence how mothers and their children reminisce (Fivush et al., 2006; Laible & Panfile, 2009; Sales, 2009). Dyads with disturbed parent–child relationships and families engulfed in conflict often have difficulty in reminiscing in coherent, collaborative, and emotion-rich ways compared with dyads with supportive and warm relationships (Dunn & Brown, 1994; Laible, 2011; Oppenheim & Koren-Karie, 2009). In addition, mothers with insecure internal representations of relationships often engage in less elaborative (Fivush & Sales, 2006; McDonnell, Valentino, Comas, & Nuttall, 2016; Reese, 2008) and emotion-rich reminiscing (Bost et al., 2006; Coppola, Pozetti, & Vaughn, 2014) compared to mothers with more secure attachment styles.

However, because the majority of the extant reminiscing research is conducted among average- to high-functioning, middle-class families (see Fivush, 2011), there is a critical need to evaluate mother–child reminiscing among families with pathogenic relationships, and within poverty more generally, and to identify individual differences that are associated with mother–child reminiscing among high-risk families. Child maltreatment is perhaps the most pathogenic relationship experience that can occur between children and their caregivers and often transpires within chaotic family contexts where caregiving severely deviates from expected and acceptable child-rearing standards (Cicchetti & Valentino, 2006). Approximately 700,000 substantiated cases of child maltreatment occur every year in the United States, and the majority of maltreated children (~90%) are victimized by one or both of their parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Although child maltreatment

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