



Mutually Responsive Orientation: A novel observational assessment of mother-child mealtime interactions



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ABSTRACT

Mother-child mealtime interactions during preschool years is an important but overlooked factor when evaluating the influence of parent-child relationships on child eating and weight. This paper describes the validation of the Mutually Responsive Orientation (MRO) coding system adapted for assessing parent-child interactions during food preparation and consumption situations. Home-based mealtimes of 94 mothers and their children (3.03 ± 0.75 years) were filmed at two time points, 12-months apart. Filmed dimensions of mutual mother-child responsiveness, shared positive affect, maternal control relating to food and child compliance were assessed. Objective BMI and maternal reports of parenting, feeding, child eating, diet and child temperament were also collected. Correlations, repeated measures ANOVAs and regressions were performed to examine the validity of MRO variables and their stability across both time points. Validation analysis showed the MRO coding system performed as expected: dyads with higher MRO scores expressed lower control/power assertion, lower child non-compliance, and greater committed compliance. The measure demonstrated sensitivity to specific contexts: maternal responsiveness, mother and child positive affect were higher during food consumption compared to food preparation. Coded dimensions were stable across time points, with the exception of decreases in maternal responsiveness in food consumption and child non-compliance in food preparation. MRO and maternal dimensions were correlated with maternally reported parenting and feeding measures. Maternal responsiveness (inversely) and child responsiveness (positively) were concurrently associated with child fussy eating, and child refusal was prospectively and inversely associated with child fussy eating. Findings suggest the adapted MRO coding system is a useful measure for examining observed parent-child mealtime interactions potentially implicated in preschoolers' eating and weight development.

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1. Introduction

The quality of the parent-child relationship has been implicated in the development of child eating behaviours and weight (Anderson, Gooze, Lemeshow, & Whitaker, 2013; Bergmeier, Skouteris, & Hetherington, 2015; Demir et al., 2012; Jansen, Daniels, & Nicholson, 2012; Rhee, 2008; Skouteris et al., 2012). Mealtimes are interactive activities frequently shared by one

Abbreviations: CEBO, Children's Eating Behaviour Questionnaire; CFQ, Child Feeding Questionnaire; EPAQ, Eating and Physical Activity Questionnaire; MRO, Mutually Responsive Orientation; n.s., Not significant; T1, Time one; T2, Time two.

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(typically mothers) or both parents and their young children. Thus, these contexts provide an opportunity to observe and characterize the quality of this formative relationship upon child eating and weight outcomes (Bergmeier, Skouteris, & Hetherington, 2015; Demir et al., 2012).

The majority of studies evaluating associations between parent-child relationships and child eating or weight status have predominately implemented self-reported parental measures, overlooking the child's influence on dyadic interactions. Moreover, there has not always been correspondence between parents' reported attitudes and actual observed behaviours in both the child socialisation and parent feeding literature (Bergmeier, Skouteris, Haycraft, Haines, & Hooley, 2015; Farrow, Blissett, & Haycraft, 2011; Haycraft & Blissett, 2008; Kochanska, Kuczynski, & Radke-Yarrow, 1989; Lewis & Worobey, 2011). Hence, researchers have emphasised the importance of incorporating observational methods for assessing contextual mother-child dyadic interactions associated with child eating and weight (Bergmeier, Skouteris, & Hetherington, 2015; Demir et al., 2012; Kasper et al., 2016).

However, a recent systematic review of observational approaches used to evaluate mother-child mealtime interactions during preschool years revealed that only two of 13 studies used observational measures to assess the quality of the relationship between the mother and child and these measures also adopted a perspective where influence flows from parent to child (e.g., parenting control support, responsiveness, sensitivity) (Drucker, Hammer, Agras, & Bryson, 1999; Hughes et al., 2011). Current measures do not comprehensively capture the bi-directionality of influences that may shape mother-child mealtime interactions associated with child eating and weight (e.g., influence of both parent and child levels of responsiveness on each other).

The Mutual Responsive Orientation (MRO) observational coding system, stemming from several early developmental traditions (attachment theory; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, 1982; mutuality and reciprocity in the parent-child dyad; Maccoby & Martin, 1983, Maccoby, 1999; and communal relationships; Clark, 1984), was developed to capture bi-directional influences both at the level of individuals and dyads; responsiveness of mothers to their children, children to their mothers, and the extent to which they share positive affective states (Kochanska & Murray, 2000; Kochanska, 1997, 2002; Kochanska, Forman, Aksan, & Dunbar, 2005).

There is an interdependent relationship between the parental (e.g., mental health, education perceptions of child's ability to self-regulate food intake, concern about child weight, and feeding practices), child (e.g., eating behaviour, temperament, self-regulation, age, gender and weight) and dyadic characteristics (quality of parent-child relationship and food-related interactions) that influence child eating and related weight outcomes (McPhee, Skouteris, Daniels, & Jansen, 2014). Hence, parent-child relationships and interactions around food play an important role in the development and maintenance of eating difficulties (Mitchell, Farrow, Haycraft, & Meyer, 2013). Fussy eating has been associated with lower dietary variability and poor diet, but not necessarily always underweight (Dovey, Staples, Gibson, & Halford, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2013). A parent of a fussy eater may pressure their child to eat more, especially if they are concerned about their child being or becoming underweight (Gregory, Paxton, & Brozovic, 2010). Yet, observational data shows the number and types of maternal prompts (intrusive; assertive) for her child to eat, are associated with increases in food consumption, total energy intake and child adiposity (Drucker et al., 1999; Lumeng et al., 2012; Orrell-Valente et al., 2007). Coercing a child to eat past satiety may disrupt the child's ability to learn to self-regulate dietary intake (Birch, McPhee, Shoba, Steinberg, & Krehbiel, 1987). A parent may also respond to child food fussiness by lowering their expectations

of the nutritional value of the child's food consumption. For some fussy eaters, the intake of fresh produce such as fruit and vegetables may be replaced with low-nutrient processed food offering higher palatability due its sugar, fat and salt content (Dennison, Rockwell, & Baker, 1998; Singh, 2014). Parental responses to child enjoyment of food may also vary according parent, child and dyadic factors. Inadequate parental responses (i.e., excessive overt controlling feeding practices) may undermine children's ability to adequately self-regulate dietary intake, increasing the child's desire for food and risk for obesity (Mitchell et al., 2013). Whereas involving children in meal preparation may increase the acceptance of a wider variety of food, including vegetables (van der Horst, Ferrage, & Rytz, 2014). How parent-child dyads function during food preparation may help to set the tone for the quality of dyadic exchanges during meals that influences what children eat.

The parental responsiveness dimension of the MRO construct (based on Attachment Theory principles; Bowlby, 1969; 1973; 1980; 1982; Aksan, Kochanska, & Ortmann, 2006) involves taking into account the individual's perspective and needs, adapting routines accordingly, but still providing appropriate levels of guidance and support (e.g., increasing a child's exposure to the rejected food; modelling healthful eating; health reasoning, Mitchell et al., 2013). The MRO responsiveness dimension differs conceptually from the general parenting responsiveness dimension, which refers to parental warmth and affection expressed toward the child only (Wake, Nicholson, Hardy, & Smith, 2007). The degree of mutual reciprocity and responsiveness within the dyad appears to be an important component distinguishing dyads experiencing smooth-flowing, cooperative parent-child interactions from parent-child relationships that develop along an adversarial developmental path (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Mutual reciprocity develops in dyads with a history of responsiveness to each other's bids and needs, which promotes the child's willingness to cooperate with the parent, thus lessening the need for the parent to apply strong pressure (Aksan et al., 2006; Kochanska & Aksan, 2004, 2006). Theoretically, MRO during food-related exchanges should also reduce the frequency and severity of mealtime conflict (typically associated with the development and maintenance of feeding problems) and promote the child's willingness to internalize the parent's food attitudes and behaviours; the MRO coding system characterises the degree of parental power assertion and qualitative distinctions in children's compliance and non-compliance to parental directives in discipline contexts (see Kochanska & Aksan, 1995; Kochanska, Aksan, & Nichols, 2003). Additionally, research has linked parent-child relationship quality, self-regulation and weight status during early childhood (Anderson & Keim, 2016). The MRO coding system has been successful in specifying the direction of effects in the development of early self-regulation (e.g., Kochanska & Aksan, 2004), which may help to bolster the socialisation of children's health eating behaviours.

To our knowledge, no study has explored the use of the coding system within the context of parent-child mealtime interactions; hence, it is not yet clear whether MRO predicts child weight and eating outcomes. The overall aim of this study was to report on the validation of the MRO coding system for observed mother-child mealtime interactions and to explore associations with child eating and BMI. The specific aims were to: 1) To adapt the coding system to two mother-child interactions contexts (food preparation and consumption) to demonstrate the measures' sensitivity to mother-child food-related context-specific interactions; 2) assess the construct validity and stability of the adapted MRO coding system; and 3) examine its convergent and predictive validity. It was hypothesised that higher mother-child responsiveness and mother-child positive affect (MRO) would be associated with lower exertion of maternal control relating to food and higher child

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