



Maternal representations of their children in relation to feeding beliefs and practices among low-income mothers of young children



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ABSTRACT

Identifying maternal characteristics in relation to child feeding is important for addressing the current childhood obesity epidemic. The present study examines whether maternal representations of their children are associated with feeding beliefs and practices. Maternal representations refer to mothers' affective and cognitive perspectives regarding their children and their subjective experiences of their relationships with their children. This key maternal characteristic has not been examined in association with maternal feeding. Thus the purpose of the current study was to examine whether maternal representations of their children, reflected by Working Model of the Child Interview typologies (Balanced, Disengaged, or Distorted), were associated with maternal feeding beliefs (Authority, Confidence, and Investment) and practices (Pressure to Eat, Restriction, and Monitoring) among low-income mothers of young children, with maternal education examined as a covariate. Results showed that Balanced mothers were most likely to demonstrate high authority, Distorted mothers were least likely to demonstrate confidence, and Disengaged mothers were least likely to demonstrate investment in child feeding. Moreover, Balanced mothers were least likely to pressure their children to eat. Findings are discussed with regard to implications for the study of childhood obesity and for applied preventions.

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1. Introduction

Maternal feeding beliefs and practices, such as authority, indulgence, restriction, and pressure, play important roles in children's eating behaviors and weight outcomes (Frankel et al., 2014; Mitchell, Farrow, Haycraft, & Meyer, 2013; Powell, Farrow, & Meyer, 2011). Although a substantial body of research has examined links between maternal feeding and child eating and weight outcomes, a recent systematic review found relatively few studies investigating characteristics of the mother that predict maternal feeding (McPhie, Skouteris, Daniels, & Jansen, 2014). Identification of mother characteristics that are associated with specific feeding

beliefs and practices would inform the development of more effective preventive interventions tailored to these characteristics.

A key maternal characteristic that has not been examined in association with maternal feeding is maternal representations (or "internal working models") of their children. Research on internal working models is informed by decades of work demonstrating that parents' representations of their own experiences growing up in their families of origin, assessed via the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1985), are associated with parenting and child outcomes including attachment security (see meta-analysis by van IJzendoorn, 1995). Internal working models assessed via the AAI reflect the adult individuals' "current state of mind" with regards to early experience, that is, rather than assess whether early life experiences were positive or negative, the AAI classifies how integrated and coherent an individuals' narrative is when currently describing these experiences (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Similar to the AAI, maternal representations refer

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to mothers' affective and cognitive perspectives regarding their children and their subjective experiences of their relationships with their children (Zeanah & Benoit, 1995). These representations are presumed to function as templates through which mothers interpret children's behavior, and thereby shape caregiving responses (Rosenblum, Dayton, & McDonough, 2006; Sokolowski, Hans, Bernstein, & Cox, 2007) and associate with quality of mother–child interactions as well as parenting warmth, sensitivity, intrusiveness, control, negativity and hostility (Korja et al., 2010; Rosenblum, McDonough, Muzik, Miller, & Sameroff, 2002; Schechter et al., 2008). These representations develop as early as the prenatal and infancy periods (Huth-Bocks, Theran, Levendosky, & Bogat, 2011; Theran, Levendosky, Bogat, & Huth-Bocks, 2005) and though relatively stable (Moss, Cyr, Bureau, Tarabulsky, & Dubois-Comtois, 2005), are also somewhat open to revision (e.g., Aber, Belsky, Slade, & Crnic, 1999).

Maternal representations of their children are assessed via the well-validated representational interview, the “Working Model of the Child Interview” (WMCI; Rosenblum et al., 2002; Vreeswijk, Maas, & van Bakel, 2012; Zeanah & Benoit, 1995), a semi-structured interview designed to capture mothers' perceptions and subjective experience of their child's personality and relationship with their child. Consistent with classifying narrative responses into three main typology categories on the AAI, the coding of maternal responses yields three main WMCI typologies (Table 1, Rosenblum et al., 2006): Balanced, Disengaged, and Distorted. These typologies distinguish clinical from nonclinical samples of children (Borghini et al., 2006) and mothers (Korja, et al., 2010; Rosenblum et al., 2002) and relate to sensitive parenting behavior (Dayton, Levendosky, Davidson, & Bogat, 2010; Schechter et al., 2008; Sokolowski et al., 2007).

WMCI typologies are associated with failure to thrive (Coolbear & Benoit, 1999) as well as sleep and developmental and regulatory risks in infancy (Benoit, Parker, & Zeanah, 1997). We have been unable to identify any studies that have examined WMCI typologies in relation to maternal feeding beliefs and practices. A related construct, “mind-mindedness,” has been related to maternal feeding in infancy. Specifically, Farrow and Blissett (2014) demonstrated that mothers' use of language that reflects an appreciation of the child “as a mental agent” (that is “mind-minded” terms that, for example, reflect that the child may be thinking or feeling) is related to general parenting sensitivity and positive feeding behaviors. While both the WMCI and the mind-mindedness coding involve narrative-based assessments and capture aspects of maternal understanding of the child as a separate, thinking/feeling individual, the current study using the WMCI extends this prior work in several ways, by: (1) assessing broader representational typologies, which have been suggested to reflect broader organizational constructs that may underlie an individual's capacity to engage in mind-minded comments and sensitive behavior, and (2) by examining these associations among caregivers of older, preschool-aged children.

Thus, the present study sought to test the hypothesis that maternal representations of their children, reflected by WMCI typologies, are associated with maternal feeding beliefs and practices among low-income families of young children. Specifically, we hypothesized that mothers with Balanced representations of their children would report a high level of authority and confidence in feeding their children, be deeply invested in child feeding; and be less controlling in their feeding (i.e., exhibit less pressure to eat or restriction of eating). We hypothesized that Disengaged mothers would report high authority and confidence, yet given a tendency towards emotional distancing, they were expected to be less deeply invested in child feeding. Finally, given a tendency for Distorted mothers to have narratives that reflect feelings of being emotionally overwhelmed, we hypothesized that Distorted mothers would report low authority and confidence, yet deep investment, in child feeding.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and recruitment

Participants included 295 caregivers ($M = 31.02$ years; $SD = 7.06$; 67% non-Hispanic white; 45% single parent) and their young children ($M = 5.39$ years; $SD = 0.75$; range = 4–8 years; 153 males) recruited from Head Start, a free, federally-subsidized preschool program for low-income children, in Southeastern Michigan. Participants were drawn from a longitudinal cohort study examining stress and eating in children between 2009 and 2011. Children in the longitudinal cohort were enrolled in Head Start programs at the time of recruitment into the original study; their primary caregivers were later contacted by phone and invited to participate in this follow-up study on child feeding. Inclusion criteria for the original study as well as this follow up study were that caregiver and child were fluent in English; caregiver had an education less than a 4-year college degree; child was born at 35 weeks gestation or more without significant perinatal or neonatal complications; child had no significant developmental disabilities, serious medical problems, history of food allergies, or any form of disordered eating; and child was not in foster care. In this sample, 95% of the primary caregivers were biological mothers and the remaining 5% were adoptive mothers, stepmothers, and grandmothers; thus, the entire sample was referred as “mothers”. All mothers provided written informed consent and received \$150 as a compensation for their participation. This study was approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board.

2.2. Procedure

Interviews were conducted by trained research assistants; children were not present during the interviews. All research assistants were certified in reliable interview administration through

Table 1
Descriptions of the three standard WMCI representational typologies (see Rosenblum et al., 2006).

Typology	Description
Balanced	Balanced representations were characterized by emotional warmth, acceptance and responsiveness to the child's needs, narrative coherence and richly detailed descriptions. Although mothers in this category may have expressed feelings of challenge or difficulty in parenting, such concerns did not overwhelm or dominate their perceptions of their children. <i>Characteristic of the emotion/cognition regulation style in this category was an ability to access a range of emotions, without a need to minimize or be overwhelmed by feelings regarding their children and parenting.</i>
Disengaged	Disengaged representations were characterized by an emotional distance from the child. Mothers in this category often had less to say and were likely to describe their children in a manner that minimized affective involvement, revealing a tendency to distance, reject and/or fail to acknowledge their children's emotional and dependency needs. <i>Characteristic of the emotion/cognition regulation style in this category was an emotion-deactivating style.</i>
Distorted	Distorted representations were characterized broadly by a tendency to heighten affect and a poorly organized, low-coherence narrative. Mothers in this category often appeared confused or unsure about their relationship with their children, and/or anxiously overwhelmed by their children's perceived needs and experiences. Some were distracted by other concerns, self-involved, or role reversed in their relationships with their children, describing their young children as “buddies” or “confidants.”. <i>Characteristic of the emotion regulation among mothers in this category was an emotion-overactivating style.</i>

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