



Brief Report

Self-reported romantic attachment style predicts everyday maternal caregiving behavior at home

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ABSTRACT

Although numerous studies examined how individual differences in mothers' discourse about their early attachment experiences are associated with their caregiving behaviors toward their children, research examining how self-reported romantic attachment style is associated with maternal caregiving has been very limited. To help fill this gap, we examined whether self-reported romantic attachment style is associated with maternal caregiving behaviors observed in home settings. Mother–child interactions were observed for three hours and the mothers completed measures of attachment style and child temperament. Results indicated that attachment-related avoidance, but not attachment-related anxiety, was negatively associated with global maternal sensitivity, after controlling for the child's temperament. Consistent with the propositions of attachment theory, both attachment-related avoidance and anxiety were associated with specific caregiving themes.

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1. Introduction

In his attachment theory, Bowlby (1988) argued that human infants are equipped with an attachment behavioral system regulating proximity seeking behaviors toward the parents. He proposed that parents' responses to the infant were also guided by a behavioral system—the caregiving system. Furthermore, according to Bowlby, the functioning of the parent's caregiving system is affected by the parent's own attachment experiences. Although Bowlby mainly focused on the attachment system, his ideas about interrelated behavioral systems inspired his successors. Research examining the relationship between adult attachment style and caregiving behavior evolved in two relatively distinct directions. In one direction, led primarily by developmental and clinical psychologists, the focus has been on understanding how adults' "state of mind with respect to attachment" assessed by the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985) relates to the quality of caregiving toward their children (e.g., Adam, Gunnar, & Tanaka, 2004; Crowell & Feldman, 1989). In the other direction, made up of social and personality psychologists, the focus has been on understanding how self-reported attachment style is related to

caregiving behaviors toward romantic partners (e.g., Feeney & Collins, 2001). The question of whether measures traditionally used to study the nature of a particular type of attachment relationship (e.g., romantic) could predict outcomes in another type of attachment relationship (e.g., parent–child) has been hardly studied. To help fill this gap, the aim of the present study was to investigate whether self-reported adult romantic attachment predicts everyday maternal caregiving behaviors in the home context.

Studies examining whether parents' (usually mothers') attachment style predicts the quality of their caregiving behaviors toward their child mostly used the AAI. The AAI captures variation in the organization of adults' discourse when talking about their own early childhood experiences (Main et al., 1985). A *secure* state of mind is characterized by a coherent discourse, a *dismissing* state of mind is characterized by idealizing or derogating parents without being able to provide relevant memories, and a *preoccupied* state of mind is characterized by excessive emotional involvement and preoccupation about childhood experiences with parents. Studies found that in both laboratory and naturalistic contexts, mothers with a secure state of mind were more sensitive caregivers than mothers with a preoccupied or dismissing state of mind (e.g., Adam et al., 2004; Crowell & Feldman, 1989). In addition, preoccupied mothers were more likely to engage in angry, intrusive, and inconsistent caregiving (Adam et al., 2004; Crowell & Feldman, 1989) whereas dismissing mothers were more likely to engage in detached caregiving (Crowell & Feldman, 1989).

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To achieve an integration of the two traditions that investigate the link between adult attachment and caregiving, studies using the AAI need to be complemented by studies using self-report measures of adult attachment (see also Roisman, 2009). The kind of variation assessed by self-report measures is different from that assessed by the AAI. Self-report measures capture variation in adults' mental representations of romantic relationships in terms of how uncomfortable they feel about depending on partners, referred to as *attachment-related avoidance*, and how worried they are about abandonment, referred to as *attachment-related anxiety* (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). Attachment-related avoidance and anxiety show a low to moderate degree of correspondence to the AAI's dismissing and preoccupied categories, respectively (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Roisman, 2009). To our best knowledge, research examining whether parents' self-reported attachment style predicts *observed* parental caregiving behaviors has been limited to only a few studies (Edelstein et al., 2004; Rholes, Simpson, & Blakely, 1995). Rholes et al. (1995) found that mothers' attachment-related avoidance was associated with less positive regard and emotional support toward their child during a laboratory problem solving task. Edelstein et al. (2004) extended these findings by showing that parents' attachment avoidance was associated with less responsive caregiving as children were receiving inoculation (a stressful event likely to activate the attachment system of the child), especially when the children were highly distressed. Neither Rholes et al. (1995) nor Edelstein et al. (2004) found an association between parents' attachment-related anxiety and caregiving behavior toward their children.

Due to the restriction of the observation episode to a single type of event Rholes et al. (1995) or Edelstein et al. (2004) could capture only some but not all aspects of parental caregiving—e.g., accepting the child's attachment needs, perceiving and responding accurately to the child's signals, being in synch with the child while providing care, being accessible to the child when needed—which are central for shaping the attachment relationship between the child and the parent (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Prolonged observations are better suited to capturing these different aspects of caregiving behavior than short observations during a single episode (Pederson & Moran, 1995). Moreover, neither of these two studies examined caregiving behavior in a context where the attachment relationship is naturally being shaped—i.e., the home. Thus, in the current study, we attempted to extend Rholes et al. (1995) and Edelstein et al.'s (2004) findings by observing everyday maternal caregiving behavior for a longer time period (approximately three hours) in the home setting. We used the Maternal Behavior Q-Set (MBQS; Pederson & Moran, 1995) to assess the quality of maternal caregiving. The MBQS is based on Ainsworth et al.'s (1978) conceptualization of early maternal caregiving behaviors. The measure consists of 90 behavior-specific items assessing maternal caregiving (see the Section 2 for a more detailed description of the measure). We examined whether self-reported adult attachment style is associated with (i) the global maternal sensitivity score computed using all 90 MBQS items and (ii) specific caregiving themes represented by groups of individual MBQS items.

In line with previous findings (Edelstein et al., 2004; Rholes et al., 1995), we hypothesized that mother's attachment-related avoidance would be negatively related to global maternal sensitivity. Previous research showed that attachment-related avoidance was positively associated with preferring a psychological distance with relationship partners, experiencing discomfort with intimate interactions, devaluing the importance of attachment-related needs, and missing, or failing to accurately decode, relationship partners' signals (e.g., Collins, Guichard, Ford, & Feeney, 2004; Schachner, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2005). Thus, we expected mothers' attachment-related avoidance to be negatively associated with

items assessing the mother's accessibility to the child, the mother's comfort with affectionate exchanges with the child, and the mother's sensitivity to the child's signals both when interacting and not interacting with the child.

In line with Rholes et al. (1995) and Edelstein et al. (2004), we did not expect a relationship between attachment-related anxiety and global maternal sensitivity. However, we did expect some individual MBQS items to be associated with attachment-related anxiety. Anxious individuals generally desire extreme closeness with relationship partners (Collins et al., 2004). This tendency toward excessive closeness is likely to interfere with their ability to encourage the child's autonomy and provide a secure base for the child's exploration (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Moreover, anxious mothers' chronic worries about caregiving performance (Snell, Overbey, & Brewer, 2005) may lead to frustration and anger when they fail to meet their own high expectations. This, in turn, may create conflict between the mother and their child. Thus, we expected attachment-related anxiety to be positively associated with the MBQS items assessing conflict between the mother and the child, and the mother's interference with the child's exploratory behavior.

Theory and research suggests that an important individual-difference factor influencing parental caregiving is the child's temperament (e.g., Wachs, 2006). Therefore, we controlled for this variable in the present study. We expected attachment-related avoidance to be related to global maternal sensitivity even after controlling for child temperament.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

Eighty-five Turkish mothers and their children (47 boys, 38 girls) participated in the study. Mothers' age ranged from 20 to 45 years (*Mdn* = 30 years). The children's age ranged from 10 to 50 months (*Mdn* = 24 months; see Posada et al., 1999 for a study using the MBQS in a similar age range): Forty-six children were between 10 and 24 months old, 24 children were between 25 and 36 months old, and 15 children were between 37 and 50 months old. Forty-five dyads were from families with low socioeconomic background, 33 dyads were from families with middle socioeconomic background, and seven dyads were from families with high socioeconomic background. Mothers' education ranged from some elementary school education to college degree: two mothers did not complete elementary school, 24 mothers completed elementary school, nine mothers completed secondary school, 31 mothers had a high school degree, and 19 mothers had a college degree. Eighteen mothers were working full-time when the study was conducted. Eighty-two children were living with their biological mothers and fathers. Parents of three children were divorced and the children were living with their mother and stepfather. Majority of children were either first-born (37 children) or second-born (31 children). Median number of siblings was 1 (range = 0–3).

2.2. Measures and procedure

Two trained observers visited the mother–child dyad at home and observed their interactions for approximately 3 h. Home visits were scheduled to take place when the mother and the child were alone at home and the child was awake.¹ At the beginning of the visit, the observers got acquainted with the mother and encouraged

¹ Twenty-six observations started before noon (earliest 9 a.m.) and 59 observations started after noon (latest 3:00 pm). The starting time of observation was not associated with maternal sensitivity, nor did it moderate the effect of mothers' attachment style on sensitivity.

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