



SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY
DOCTORATE IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Literature Review

**The Association between Attachment,
Maternal Reflective Functioning and
Expressed Emotion**

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LITERATURE REVIEW COVER SHEET

The Association between Attachment, Maternal Reflective Functioning and Expressed Emotion

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Literature Review: The association between attachment, maternal reflective functioning and expressed emotion

Abstract

Childhood attachment, maternal reflective function (RF) and expressed emotion (EE) are important areas to investigate because children's insecure attachment has been linked to a range of poor outcomes (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson & Collins, 2005). Low parental RF has been linked to insecure child attachment (Slade et al., 2005) and high EE has been associated with disorganised child attachment (Gravener et al., 2012) and antisocial behaviour problems (Caspi et al., 2004). A link between these areas could provide the theoretical basis to develop interventions to improve attachment between parents and children. This review defines the three constructs (attachment, parental RF and EE), discusses the background theory, describes the methodology used to find relevant articles and critiques the current research. No studies were identified that examined the inter-relationships between all three constructs, therefore, a critical evaluation is provided examining the relationship of attachment with RF and EE separately.

Introduction

Attachment is an emotional bond between an individual and an attachment figure (usually a caregiver), characterized by specific behaviours in children, such as seeking proximity when distressed (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment theory posits that infants depend on caregivers for early emotion-regulation (Bowlby, 1969). Parental RF is defined as a parent's ability to reflect upon and interpret their child's mental states (desires, emotions, thoughts etc.) and underlying behaviours and relate them to their own feelings, thoughts and behaviours (Slade et al., 2005). These skills are

essential to the parent-child relationship (De Wolff & van Ijzendoorn, 1997). Recent research has focused on the parent's capacity to treat the child as a psychological agent (Sharp & Fonagy, 2008), specifically, exploring whether parental mentalisation of the child influences attachment security (Fonagy & Allison, 2012). Mentalising is the ability to relate to others (especially attachment figures) by understanding one's own and others' behaviour in terms of underlying mental states and intentions (Fonagy, Gergely & Target, 2007). A mother's capacity to mentalise about her child (maternal RF) has been linked to adult and infant attachment (Slade, Grienenberger, Bernbach, Levy & Locker, 2005), but research addressing this relatively new construct is limited. EE comprises negative affectivity (criticism and over-involvement) and positive affectivity (warmth) (Sonuga-Barke et al., 2008). High levels of parental EE have been linked to disorganised child attachment (Jacobsen, Hibbs & Ziegenhain, 2000), and parental criticism has been linked to childhood psychopathology and conduct disorder (CD; Bolton et al., 2003).

Attachment theory and the transmission of attachment. Attachment theory proposes that infants (6 - 9 months) are biologically predisposed to form emotional bonds to available adult caregivers (Bowlby, 1969). Through daily interactions, infants acquire event-based information of attachment figures' tendencies to be sensitive, available and responsive to their needs (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1971). Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall (1978) operationalised the measurement of infant attachment security using a separation procedure, the Strange Situation. Children's attachment quality can then be classified as secure, insecure or disorganised (Main & Solomon, 1990). A link was found between maternal behaviour during infancy and the quality of a child's attachment at one year old.

Adult attachment is classified as insecure or secure/autonomous based on organisation and coherence of responses regarding past attachment relationships using The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan & Main, 1984). Research shows an association between adult and infant attachment, however, the mechanisms underlying the transmission of attachment remain largely unknown. Main, Kaplan and Cassidy (1985) suggested that mothers who coherently represent their own feelings and thoughts relating to attachment were able to recognise and respond sensitively to the attachment needs for proximity, safety and comfort in their children. Therefore, maternal sensitivity was proposed as a behavioural mechanism through which maternal mental states are transmitted to child attachment.

Van Ijzendoorn's (1995) meta-analysis found that a small proportion (23%) of the relationship between infant and adult attachment classification is accounted for by maternal sensitivity. Subsequently, investigations of infant security and parental state of mind regarding attachment relationships have only shown a weak mediating role for maternal sensitivity (Pederson, Gleason, Moran & Bento, 1998, Raval et al., 2008). The failure to validate the mediation model may be due to methodological limitations. One problem confronting tests of mediation is the lack of agreement on an operational definition of sensitivity (Atkinson et al., 2005). Research has investigated alternative mechanisms involved in the intergenerational transmission of attachment including facets of parental mentalisation concepts such as maternal mind-mindedness (MMM) and parental RF.

Maternal mind-mindedness. The following sections discuss MMM research and examine RF and related mentalisation constructs. Meins (1997) described MMM as a mother's ability to treat their child as an individual with an autonomous mind,

which is demonstrated by her use of mental characteristics to describe the child. Meins, Fernyhough, Fradley and Tuckey (2001) found appropriate mind-minded comments about their child during free play predicted infant-parent attachment security. No association was found between the maternal sensitivity scale (Ainsworth, Bell & Stayton, 1971) and MMM, suggesting these constructs are unrelated. One significant limitation was that mind-mindedness is examined in a specific observational play context. Therefore, it is important to investigate this construct in other situations where mothers will engage in caregiving and play activities (Meins et al., 2001).

Meins et al.'s (2002) longitudinal follow-up study also found attachment security was negatively correlated with mothers' incongruent mind-related comments and positively correlated with appropriate comments. However, this research used a subset of Meins et al.'s (2001) sample and relevant findings are a replication of the original study within this subset. Recently, Arnott and Meins (2007) investigated adult attachment, MMM, RF and infant attachment in a longitudinal study. Mothers' prenatal RF scores were negatively correlated with inappropriate mind-related comments. Infant-parent attachment security was related to MMM, although this relationship failed to reach significance. They also replicated Fonagy, Steele, Moran, Steele and Higgitt's (1991) finding that autonomous mothers attained higher RF scores than nonautonomous mothers. However, the small sample size (18 mothers, 15 fathers) means these findings should be considered tentative until they have been replicated in a larger sample.

Reflective function. Parental RF was developed from Fonagy et al.'s (1991) general concept of mentalisation in an attempt to understand how attachment styles

were transmitted from parent to child. Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist and Target (2002) proposed that the more individuals could envision mental states in themselves or others (and discriminate between them) the more likely they are to engage in sustaining, intimate and productive relationships. The main principle of RF is representing the mental states and internal experiences of others to anticipate and interpret behaviour (Fonagy & Target, 2002). Attachment research has recently changed focus from attachment behaviour to mental representations of attachment (Slade, Belsky, Aber, & Phelps, 1999).

Comparison of reflective function and related constructs. Although the construct of MMM overlaps with parental RF, the key feature of RF is the bi-directional relationship between behaviours and mental states of both parent and child, which is not specifically investigated by MMM. Rosenblum et al. (2008) found that MMM and maternal RF were highly correlated. However, hierarchical multiple regression analyses found that mind-minded comments did not explain the variance accounted for beyond maternal reflectivity. The authors suggested that parental reflectivity was a more global capacity that influences the parent's capability to attribute mental states to their infant during play or active engagement (e.g. MMM comments). Additionally, parental RF examines a general capacity to reflect upon their child's internal experiences, rather than specifically during play. One limitation of this study is that both constructs are measured using different methodologies; an interview compared to a brief observation.

Bouchard et al. (2008) examined the relationship between three measures of mentalisation (RF, mental states, and verbal elaboration of affect) and attachment status. Extremes of mental states (including lower defensiveness and reflective mental

states) showed significant relationships with RF. The only mentalisation measure associated with attachment was RF; high scores were related to attachment security. These findings suggest a unique relation of RF to attachment, compared with other mentalisation measures. However, a major limitation is the assessment of RF from AAI transcripts because the interview has limitations when used to assess mentalisation. The author suggests other interview formats may be preferable because they focus on specific areas of functioning and cover a wider range of affective-emotional categories, such as the PDI, which examines maternal behaviour and representations of the parent-child relationship.

Additionally, Koren-Karie, Oppenheim, Dolev, Sher and Etzion-Carasso (2002) examined the related construct of maternal insightfulness; the capacity to consider the motives underlying children's behaviours and emotional experiences in a positive, complete, child-focused manner. Mothers classified as positively insightful were rated as more sensitive and more likely to have securely attached children (Koren-Karie et al., 2002). This finding supports Fonagy et al.'s (1991) proposition that maternal reflection on the child's internal experiences is important to the formation of secure infant-mother relationships. These studies suggest RF plays a distinct role in the intergenerational transmission of attachment and is worth examining as a separate construct in relation to child attachment.

Background to expressed emotion. The second construct of interest is expressed emotion (EE), which is an important clinical measure of the family environment (Hooley & Parker, 2006). Recent EE research extended to the emotional climate of the relationship between parents and young children (Gravener et al., 2012). Longitudinal studies have found low levels of maternal warmth predict CD

(Vostanis & Nicholls, 1995). Research by McCarty, Lau, Valerie and Weisz (2004) found high EE-Criticism was associated with decreased responsiveness in the parent-child relationship and maladaptive parental behaviours. High maternal EE has been found to increase a child's risk for depressive disorder, substance abuse or CD (Schwartz, Dorer, Beardslee, Lavori & Keller, 1990). The following critique will discuss the relationship between EE and attachment.

Review Question

In what ways are RF and EE related to child attachment?

Method of search strategy

A structured search strategy was adopted to identify relevant articles for this review. PsycInfo, Medline, PsycArticles, EBSCO and Web of Knowledge databases were searched in April 2013. The search used the following terms: 'parental reflective function*', 'mentalisation', 'expressed emotion', 'child* attachment' and 'transmission gap' and included articles published between 1969 – April 2013. These dates were chosen because Bowlby's attachment theory was defined in 1969. Reference lists of selected articles were also examined to ensure the inclusion of all relevant material. No research has addressed the inter-relationships of all three constructs. Figure 1 illustrates the search method. Exclusion criteria included duplicates, articles without any of the three constructs related to the research question, those with one of the related constructs and a different topic, research only examining adult attachment, theoretical articles and reviews, leaving a remainder of seven articles for inclusion. Table 1 details the studies used in the review.

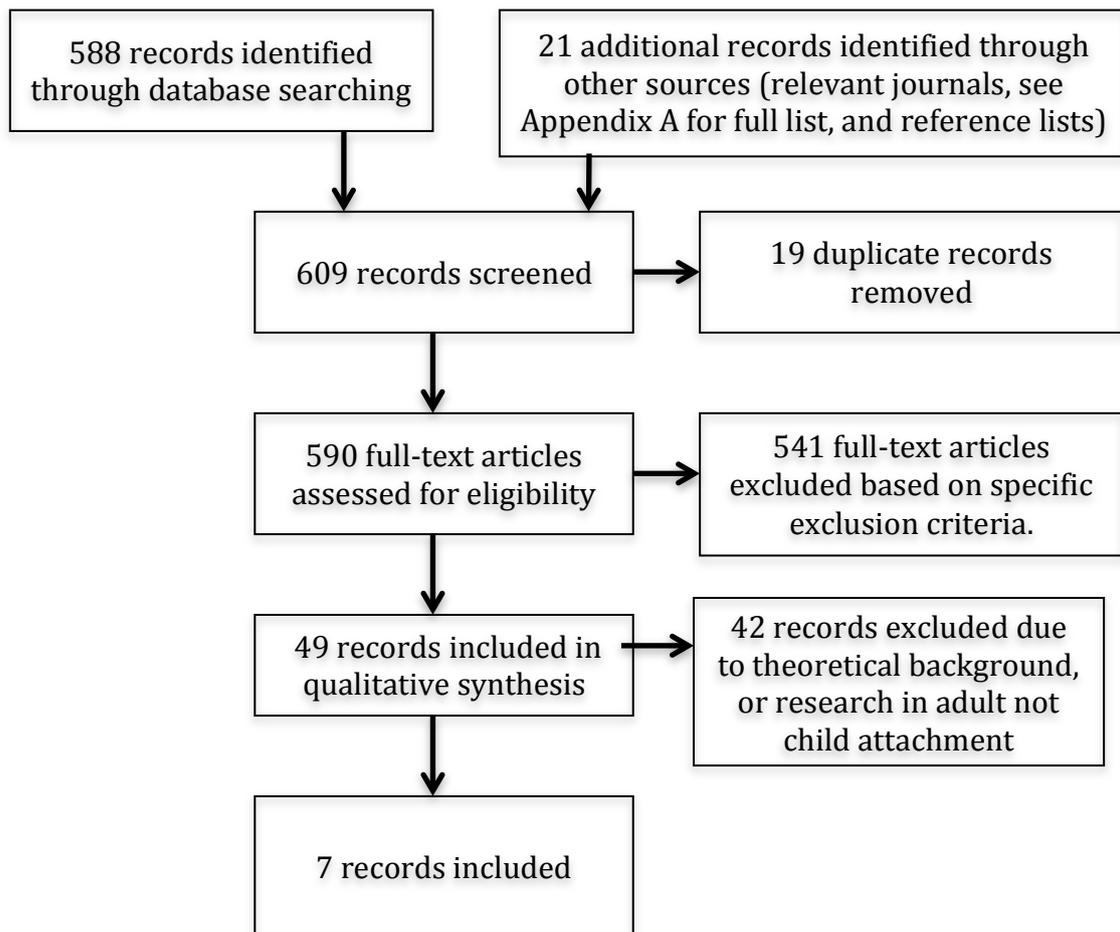


Figure 1: Flow chart showing the search strategy for review