



## Insecure attachment states of mind and atypical caregiving behavior among foster mothers

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### ABSTRACT

The current study examined the links between attachment state of mind (assessed with the Adult Attachment Interview) and atypical parenting behavior among 39 foster mothers. Insecure states of mind were associated with increased atypical parenting while interacting with the foster child, whereas unexpectedly, an unresolved state of mind was not. Furthermore, caregivers with higher coherence and lower passivity scores on the AAI were less likely to display atypical parenting behaviors. Finally, presence of abuse in the caregiver's history and overall unresolved attachment state of mind were found to relate specifically to fearful/disoriented parenting. The results suggest that an insecure state of mind may be a risk factor for atypical caregiving in certain populations, even in the absence of unresolved attachment representations.

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### Introduction

In the last decade, the field of developmental psychopathology has devoted increasing interest to what appears to be one of the most meaningful risk factors for later maladjustment: infant disorganized attachment (van Ijzendoorn, Schuengel, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1999). Researchers have found impressive long-term longitudinal relations between attachment disorganization and poor developmental outcomes such as psychopathology (e.g., Carlson, 1998; Lyons-Ruth, 2003; Ogawa, Sroufe, Weinfeld, Carlson, & Egeland, 1997). One of the populations that appears to be at highest risk for disorganized attachment and poor developmental outcomes is that of children placed in foster care at a very young age (Dozier, Stovall, Albus, & Bates, 2001; Juffer, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van Ijzendoorn, 2005). Although part of this risk for disorganized attachment can probably be attributed to children's exposure to early adversity (e.g., biological risk, maltreatment, and/or caregiving disruption), past research suggests that interactive processes between children and their foster caregivers are implicated as well (Dozier et al., 2001; Juffer et al., 2005). This is encouraging given that, in contrast to past adversity, child-caregiver interactions are amenable to intervention, even among high-risk families (e.g., Cicchetti, Rogosch, & Toth, 2006), including foster families (Dozier, Peloso, Lewis, Laurenceau, & Levine, 2008). However, remark-

ably little is known about the factors that influence foster caregivers' interactive behaviors with their foster children. Based on research on intact dyads that has documented reliable links between maternal state of mind with respect to attachment and maternal behavior, this report examines the links between foster mothers' attachment state of mind and their interactive behavior with their foster child.

#### *Parental state of mind with respect to attachment*

Attachment theorists have proposed that parents' mental representations of their own childhood attachment experiences are an important determinant of the quality of the attachment relationship formed with their infant (Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985). A robust empirical link has been found between maternal attachment representations, or states of mind, assessed with the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996), and the quality of mother-infant attachment relationships (van Ijzendoorn, 1995). The AAI is a semi-structured interview focusing on childhood and current relationships with attachment figures that provides a categorization of the individual's current state of mind regarding attachment. Adults are assigned to one of three primary categories (autonomous, dismissing, or preoccupied) on the basis of qualitative characteristics of their narrative. An autonomous state of mind is considered secure, whereas dismissing and preoccupied states of mind are deemed to be insecure. These three categories of parental AAI responses (autonomous, dismissing, and preoccupied) have been found to predict, respectively, the secure, avoidant, and resistant/ambivalent infant classifications in the Strange Situation procedure (van Ijzendoorn, 1995). Adults are assigned to a

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fourth category (unresolved/disoriented or U) if their narrative in response to queries regarding experiences of loss or abuse suggests some disorganization or disorientation of thought processes (Main, Goldwyn, & Hesse, 2002). Evidence for such a disorganized response includes 1) lapses in the monitoring of discourse, whereby the speaker no longer appears appropriately aware of the interview context (e.g., becoming silent for almost 1 min mid-sentence, failing to finish the sentence, and making no reference to the silence when resuming to speak), and 2) lapses in the monitoring of reasoning, which can take several forms, including speaking of a deceased person as though still currently involved in the speaker's daily life (Main et al., 2002). A parent's unresolved classification on the AAI has repeatedly been found to be predictive of his/her infant's disorganized attachment status (for reviews and meta-analytic evidence, see Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 2008; van IJzendoorn, 1995). Given that interactive processes are a necessary pathway for parental state of mind to be transmitted to the infant, research has paid a great deal of attention to the caregiving behaviors displayed by adults with an unresolved state of mind.

#### *Atypical caregiving behavior*

Hesse and Main (1999, 2000) suggested that discourse or reasoning lapses that occur during discussion of traumatic events may be due to dissociated or frightening memories intruding into normal conscious processes. Such intrusions of unintegrated material are postulated to occur in parent–child interactions as well, leading to atypical caregiving behaviors (Hesse, 2008; Main & Hesse, 1990). Hence, it is proposed that parents with an unresolved state of mind sometimes become frightened in response to aspects of the environment (e.g., child proximity-seeking behaviors in response to distress) that are unconsciously associated with a traumatic event in their own history. This would reactivate emotions or behaviors related to the earlier trauma, which would consequently produce in the parent threatening, frightened, dissociated or otherwise atypical behavior in the child's presence (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 2008).

Two coding schemes have been developed to assess such pathological parenting behaviors. Main and Hesse (1990) proposed to focus on anomalous forms of frightened, frightening, or dissociative parental behavior, termed FR behavior (Hesse & Main, 2000, 2006; Main & Hesse, 1990). Lyons-Ruth, Bronfman, and Parsons (1999) further hypothesized that caregivers who repeatedly provoke fear in their infants because of their unresolved experiences of loss or trauma are unlikely to be able to respond appropriately to their infants' cues or affective state, thereby disrupting the caregiver's ability to engage in appropriate interactions with the infant. Lyons-Ruth and colleagues thus developed an instrument that expanded Main and Hesse's construct of FR behavior to include a broader set of disrupted parental behaviors termed the Atypical Maternal Behavior Instrument for Assessment and Classification (AMBIANCE). Atypical (or disrupted) behaviors are coded for: affective communication errors, role confusion, negative/intrusive behaviors, disorientation, and withdrawal. A number of investigators, using the FR and AMBIANCE coding systems, have found links between atypical parenting behaviors and infant disorganization (see Madigan, Bakermans-Kranenburg, et al.'s (2006) meta-analysis for a review). While the evidence points to a robust link between atypical parenting and infant disorganized attachment, the picture is not as clear with regards to associations between unresolved adult states of mind and caregiving behavior. For instance, Schuengel, Bakermans-Kranenburg, and van IJzendoorn (1999), using the FR coding system in home-based observations, found that maternal unresolved state of mind predicted FR behavior, but only when mothers' alternative AAI classification was insecure (dismissing or preoccupied), suggesting a possible underlying protective function of an alternative secure classification.

Jacobvitz, Leon, and Hazen (2006) examined 116 mothers and their 8-month-old infants during home-based observations, which included a

play session. Mothers classified as unresolved on the AAI were significantly more likely than not-unresolved mothers to engage in FR behavior with their infants. However, and consistent with Schuengel et al. (1999), Jacobvitz and colleagues found that unresolved mothers with a secondary insecure classification displayed a higher frequency of FR behaviors than unresolved mothers with a secure secondary classification, again suggesting a potential role for secure/insecure states of mind. However, comparisons between secure versus insecure primary states of mind revealed no significant differences on FR behavior. Abrams, Rifkin, and Hesse (2006), also using Main and Hesse's FR scheme, examined a low-risk middle-class sample of father- and mother–infant dyads during a laboratory play session. Parents classified as unresolved exhibited more FR behavior in general, and specifically more dissociative behavior. However, no comparisons were made between secure versus insecure states of mind, whether as primary or secondary classification.

Using Lyons-Ruth et al.'s (1999) expanded coding scheme with a community sample, Goldberg, Benoit, Blokland, and Madigan (2003) found that mothers classified as unresolved during a prenatal AAI had higher levels of disrupted communication, fearful/disoriented behaviors, and withdrawal behaviors than mothers who were not-unresolved. Maternal behavior was assessed during the Strange Situation. No differences were found between U/secure and U/insecure mothers in relation to AMBIANCE, but comparisons between secure versus insecure primary attachment classifications were not reported. In a recent study using the AMBIANCE with an adolescent mother sample in a laboratory free-play session, Madigan, Moran, and Pederson (2006) found that disrupted behavior was associated with an unresolved state of mind, but did not report on differences between secure versus insecure attachment classifications.

The current empirical literature thus reveals that an unresolved state of mind with respect to loss or trauma is reliably associated with FR and/or atypical parenting behaviors. Further, although few studies have directly reported such analyses, comparisons between secure versus insecure classifications suggest that underlying (in)security may be relevant to understanding atypical parenting as well. Thus, there is some suggestion that broader aspects of maternal states of mind, and not just unresolved loss or trauma, may be implicated in the manifestation of atypical parenting behaviors. In fact, the moderate strength of the associations typically found between an unresolved state of mind and atypical parenting (Madigan, Bakermans-Kranenburg, et al., 2006) does appear to suggest that atypical caregiving behaviors can be displayed by parents who do not present an unresolved state of mind (see also Bernier & Meins, 2008).

Evidence from foster care research appears to suggest a similar phenomenon. Dozier et al. (2001) found that foster caregivers with insecure states of mind, and not only unresolved states of mind specifically, were more likely to have foster children with disorganized attachments. Dozier et al. hypothesized that rejecting or less extreme caregiving behaviors (compared to frightening or atypical parenting), such as those presumed to be provided by adults with insecure states of mind, may lead to disorganized attachment when children are already at risk due to exposure to early adversity. However, given that the authors did not assess parenting, it is also conceivable that some foster mothers with insecure but not-unresolved states of mind displayed atypical parenting behaviors, thereby further contributing to the development of disorganized relationships.

Thus, there is accumulating indirect evidence suggesting the possibility that insecure states of mind in general, and not just unresolved states of mind, could be risk factors for disrupted caregiving. However, this has yet to be investigated. Consequently, the main purpose of this report was to test the relation between caregiver attachment state of mind and atypical parenting behavior in a population at high risk for anomalous parenting and attachment: foster care dyads. In an attempt to shed further light on Dozier et al.'s (2001) findings pertaining to foster mothers with insecure states of

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