



Mother–infant interaction and children’s socio-emotional development with high- and low-risk mothers

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ABSTRACT

Charting the dynamic character of mother–infant interaction requires using observational systems of sequential coding in real time. A longitudinal study was designed to approach maternal sensitivity in a more complex way using sequential analysis. The study was conducted with 20 high- and 20 low-risk mothers and their infants (aged: 3, 12 and 15 months) to examine the relation among mothers’ risk status for physical abuse and their maternal interactive profiles, using micro-social sequential analyses, and the subsequent quality of attachment developed by their children at 15 months of age. Results showed significantly different timings in maternal responses in high- and low-risk groups, that the high-risk mothers were less sensitive: more intrusive and less discriminate regarding their infant’s behavior. Significant differences between groups were also found after infant difficult behavior. High-risk mothers’ infants were significantly more likely to develop insecure attachment. Sensitivity is proposed as a constellation of timings in early mother–infant interaction.

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Infancy is a very important period in the development of a human being. In the context of a child’s absolute dependency and vulnerability, adverse parenting practices may have very negative effects. Because early psychological structures are often developmentally incorporated into later structures, early disturbance in functioning may cause larger disturbances in later life (Cicchetti, 1989). In the literature on child maltreatment a number of researchers have underscored the interactive nature of the process involved and have characterized child maltreatment, in a family context, as parenting practices that threaten or damage the child’s optimum development (Ammerman & Patz, 1996; Cerezo, 1997; Cerezo & Pons-Salvador, 1999; Cicchetti, Toth, & Maughan, 2000; Wolfe, 1985, 1987).

A major milestone in socio-emotional development by the end of the first year of infant’s life is the attachment to the mother, as primary caretaker. Moreover, the quality of attachment has been considered a good index of child–caregiver interaction. In this context, maternal sensitivity/insensitivity, a classical concept, introduced by Ainsworth, Bell, and Stayton (1974), has been used to characterize mother–infant interaction. Therefore, sensitivity has been widely studied as a predictor of infant attachment responses using the strange situation test (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Caregiver sensitivity is, then, a construct that encapsulates appropriate parenting practices of infants, as it facilitates and supports the child’s development of secure attachment. In general, the findings consistently point to a relation between sensitive mothering and the development of securely attached children (Bakermans-Kranenburg, van Ijzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003). Conversely, caregiver insensitivity puts at risk the development of the child’s optimum competences. Moreover, abused children are more likely to be classified as insecurely attached in significantly higher proportions than non-maltreated children. This has

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been extensively documented in The Harvard Child Maltreatment Project (see Cicchetti, Carlson, Braunwald, & Aber, 1987, also Younblade & Belsky, 1990).

In focusing on interactive episodes and the quality of attachment, if the mother–infant interaction is insensitive (i.e. lack of maternal attunement or synchrony to the infant signals), it is to be expected that the working models that infants develop, as a representation of themselves, others and the world around them, will show some negative effects, reflected in the strategies used in coping with stress and relationships. Consequently, these infants are more likely to develop insecure attachment. Different strategies, or even the lack of a strategy, to cope with these patterns of ineffective dyadic interaction put children at risk of developing maladaptive patterns of emotional regulation (see the debate: De Oliveira, Bailey, Moran, & Pederson, 2004; Gergely, 2004).

Using information processing in parenting, maternal sensitivity to an infant's signals can be defined as accurate perception, appropriate interpretation and response to the infant's needs which foster synchrony in the interaction (Milner, 2000, 2003). The Social Information Processing model assumes that high levels of parenting distress can interfere with the parent's ability to implement and monitor parenting behavior (Milner, 2003). Therefore, at a micro-social level, synchrony in mother–infant interaction, as sequential relations between the infant's behavior and the maternal response (Feldman, 2007), is expected to be affected. Thus, when high-risk (for physical abuse) mothers are with their infants their immediate responses to the child's behaviors are expected to be less attuned (i.e. more intrusive and less discriminative) to their infants' behavior (Cerezo, Trenado, & Pons-Salvador, 2006).

The use of micro-social sequential analysis may represent a further step in this arena because this approach lends itself better to capturing the dynamic nature of the interaction, changing, as it does, in real time and evolving into patterns (Feldman, 2007).

The use of observational strategies of sequential coding of behaviors in real time can reveal empirically based sequential patterns that rely mainly on automatic processing. In the stream of social exchanges, the mother's appropriate or inappropriate responsiveness can provide additional meaning to the notion of maternal (in)sensitivity that might otherwise escape detection by commonly employed rating scales (Nicholls & Kirkland, 1996). In fact, the common use of rating scales could partially explain why the associations between sensitivity and attachment in meta-analysis studies have ranged from small to medium size: Goldsmith and Alansky (1987) reported association values from $r=0.10$ to 0.30 , and De Wolff and van Ijzendoorn (1997) reported a mean correlation of $r=0.24$. These results raise the question whether the complexity of the construct has been appropriately addressed (Lohaus, Keller, Ball, Elben, & Voelker, 2001) given that the notion of a causal role of sensitivity in shaping attachment is also supported in meta-analyses studies (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2003).

The present longitudinal study was designed to examine the relation between mothers' risk status for child physical abuse and their maternal interactive profiles, using micro-social sequential analyses and, subsequently, the quality of attachment developed by their children. The study focussed on the mother–infant interactive patterns in a sample of mothers selected because of their reported high levels of distress and other factors negatively affecting parenting. Likewise, the purpose was subsequently, at 15 months of age, to examine the proportion of insecure attached children in this group. A comparison group of mothers was identified on the basis of their reports of low levels of distress and other factors negatively affecting parenting. Some of the authors' previous studies with dyads of mothers and 3-month-old infants (Cerezo et al., 2006; Trenado, 2000) with smaller samples and cross-sectional design, provide some antecedents for the present research.

The general base on which hypotheses were formulated was: mothers with high-risk for child physical abuse, here called "high-risk mothers", compared with low-risk mothers, will be less sensitive in their interactions. Specifically, although high-risk mothers are expected to show affection behaviors, these behaviors will be more intrusive and less discriminative to their infants' signals. An infant needs to experience a substantial level of contingent and predictable responses from the mother to form representations of the emotions to be able to function in the relationship (Bandura, 2001; Feldman, 2007; Gergely, 2004) Therefore, infants of high-risk mothers will be more likely to show insecure attachment, an index of difficulties in emotion regulation in stressful situations.

The translation of this into specific hypotheses regarding mother–infant interaction requires looking at the sequential or temporal relations of the mothers' responses to the infant's previous behavior, i.e. timings and the constellation of the timings. Therefore, the interactive maternal behavior in high-risk mothers' group, compared with a low-risk mothers' group, was expected to be as follows:

1. Looking at each group and focusing on the mothers' affectionate but intrusive behavior, defined as interfering with the time and/or the space of the infant's action: the high-risk mothers will show a similar sequential or temporal relation between this behavior and three different infant antecedent behavior (cheerful, difficult, and play). In other words, regardless of different infant antecedent behaviors, the mothers' intrusive behavior is expected to show the same level of temporal relations with them, which is an index of indiscriminate maternal behavior. It was also expected that the low-risk group would show differences in the temporal relation, according to the infant's antecedent behavior, indicating more discriminate maternal behavior.
2. Looking at both groups, more differences between high- and low-risk groups were expected in their maternal interactive profile after the infant's difficult behavior. Some studies show that although distressed mothers show poor attunement to both positive and negative infant affect, they are more attentive to positive affect (i.e. Haft & Slade, 1989; Lohaus, Keller, Ball, Voelker, & Elben, 2004). Conversely, the literature shows that when the infant displays negative arousal these

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