



RESEARCH SUMMARY:

Predicting perceptions of attachment bond in mothers of children with autism

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Predicting Maternal Perceptions of Attachment Bond for Children Diagnosed with Autism

Abstract

The present study investigated the impact a child's autism has on maternal perceptions of the attachment bond a child has with the mother. Mothers of children with autism ($n = 49$) and mothers of typically developing children ($n = 48$) were assessed on perceived child psychosocial dysfunction, perceptions of the attachment the child has with the mother, self-efficacy, adult attachment, and collaborative caregiving. Results suggested mothers of children with autism perceived their children had weaker attachment bonds with them than did mothers of typically developing children, they experienced a weaker alliance between primary caregivers, and had a more negative view of themselves and their environment compared to mothers of typically developing children. Psychosocial dysfunction accounted for an even greater proportion of the variance in perceptions of attachment than did the presence or absence of an autism diagnosis. Models of self and other, caregiving alliance, and self-efficacy were proposed as moderators between autism diagnosis and the strength of perceptions of attachment; while a main effect of efficacy was found, there were no significant interactions. This study contributes to research in the autism domain by illustrating why it is important to foster secure and positive child-parent relationships in children diagnosed with autism despite evidence to suggest prototypical attachment behaviors are difficult to observe in these children.

Summary

It is a stressful endeavour raising a child with autism (Bouma & Schweitzer, 1990; Dumas, Wolf, Fisman, & Culligan, 1991), especially for mothers (Wolf, Noh, Fisman, & Speechley, 1989). Contributing to this stress is the tendency for the mother-child attachment relationship to be less secure compared to typically developing cohorts (Hadadian & Merbler, 1996; Rutgers, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van Ijzendoorn, & van Berckelaer-Onnes, 2004). The difficulties in social, emotional and communicative behavior characteristic of autism (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) make it difficult for parents to nurture their child's attachment relationship with them, with mothers of children with autism perceiving their child's attachment to them as weaker compared to mothers of children with other disorders (Hoppe & Harris, 1990). Given the added stress that this is likely to place on mothers, it is pertinent to explore the factors that serve to improve the mother-child relationship in this population. In this study, the association between autism and maternal perceptions of the attachment bond a child has with the mother was explored. Based on earlier literature, three variables were proposed to moderate the relationship between autism and perceptions of attachment, specifically maternal self-efficacy (Coleman & Karraker, 1998; Kuhn & Carter, 2006); models of self and other (Rholes, Simpson, & Friedman, 2006); and the caregiving alliance (Floyd & Zmich, 1991; Weissman & Cohen, 1985). It was predicted that mothers of children with autism will report weaker perceptions of the attachment their child has to them compared to mothers of typically developing children. Furthermore, it was argued that maternal self-efficacy, models of self and other, and the caregiving alliance between primary caregivers serve to moderate the association between an autism diagnosis and psychosocial dysfunction, and weaker perceived attachment relationships between child and mother.

Method

Participants

Participants were 97 mothers with a child between 3 and 12 years of age ($M = 6.53$ years, $SD = 2.68$), recruited through media outreach, university classes, and various community organizations. Forty-nine mothers had a child with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and the remaining 48 mothers had a typically developing child. All participants were required to be in a committed relationship where the task of parenting was shared between both partners. The mean age for participants was 37.51 years ($SD = 5.03$); the mean length of relationship was 14.29 years ($SD = 5.45$).

Measures

Attachment perceptions. Maternal perceptions of the child's attachment to the mother were assessed using the reinforces parent and attachment subscales of the Parenting Stress Index (PSI, Abidin, 1995). The 13 items were rated on a 5-point scale and measured the degree to which mothers felt reinforced by their child and the degree of emotional closeness that the mother felt for the. The two subscales were combined to form a single measure of maternal perceptions ($\alpha = .65$), where higher scores reflect weaker attachment perceptions.

Psychosocial dysfunction. Jellinek and colleagues' (1988) 35-item Pediatric Symptom Checklist (PSC) is a brief parent-completed psychosocial screening measure used to determine level of child impairment in cognitive, emotional and behavioral areas. Respondents rated each item on a 3-point scale representing the frequency each symptom is seen in the child. Internal consistency was quite good ($\alpha = .92$).

Maternal self-efficacy. The efficacy subscale of the Parenting Sense of Competence scale (PSOC, Gibaud-Wallston & Wandersman, 1978, as cited in Johnston & Mash, 1989), was used to measure parent efficacy. We used Johnston and Mash's (1989) seven-item structure to assess perceived competence, capability and problem-solving ability in the parenting role. Items were answered on a 6-point scale, higher scores represented higher levels of perceived parenting self-efficacy. Reliability for this measure was good ($\alpha = .88$).

Models of self and other. Attachment representations of self and other were assessed using Griffin and Bartholomew's (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) 30-item Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ). Participants rated the items on a 5-point scale indicating the extent to which each statement described their experiences in close. Four attachment prototypes are derived by averaging the items relevant to each prototype, allowing for the creation of model of self and other subscales. Positive model of self was the sum of the secure and dismissing prototypes; negative model of self was the sum of the preoccupied and fearful prototypes. A positive model of other was the sum of the secure and preoccupied prototypes; negative model of other was the sum of the fearful and dismissing prototypes. Reliability for each subscale was variable ($\alpha = .50$ to $.80$) but higher than typically reported by other researchers using this orthogonal assessment (see Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994).

Caregiving alliance. The Parenting Alliance Inventory (PAI) was created by adapting the 12-item Working Alliance Inventory Short Form (Tracey & Kokotovic, 1989) to measure caregiving alliance and collaborative parenting. Each item was answered on a 7-point scale, and all responses were summed to yield a total alliance score ($\alpha = .82$).

Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants completed the questionnaires either online, or as a paper-based questionnaire. The same questionnaires were completed by all participants, and the two groups of mothers were identified on the basis of their response to the questions related to diagnosis of disability or disorder.

Results

Mothers of children with autism reported significantly weaker perceptions of the attachment bond their child has with them, and significantly higher degrees of psychosocial dysfunction in their children, compared to mothers of typically developing children. They also reported significantly stronger negative self and negative other representations compared to the typical development group. Finally, the sense of alliance perceived to exist between a mother and her caregiving partner was stronger for mothers of typically developing children compared to mothers of children with autism.

For mothers of typically developing children, their child's perceived psychosocial dysfunction was moderately related to their internal working model of self, their parenting efficacy, and their perceptions of the attachment bond their child has with them. These results were not replicated for mothers of children with autism – for this group, psychosocial dysfunction was moderately correlated with the caregiving alliance and attachment perceptions. Negative self and negative other showed a strong positive correlation for both groups; both groups also showed a moderate negative correlation between parenting efficacy and attachment perceptions.

We predicted that a mother's sense of self-efficacy, her internal working models of self and other, and the alliance she experiences with her caregiving partner would all independently moderate the relationship between a diagnosis of autism and maternal perceptions of the attachment bond between child and mother. In all but one case, the only consistently significant main effect we found was for diagnosis; main effects for both diagnosis and efficacy were also evident in the final regression model. Significant variance in attachment perceptions accounted for in each model varied from a low of 7% (alliance) to a high of 22% (efficacy). There were no significant interaction effects.

We were also interested in exploring the possibility that a continuous measure of dysfunction may be a more useful tool for understanding the impact on mothers that their child's diagnosis of autism may have. The analyses we conducted partially supported this prediction. Psychosocial dysfunction is clearly a much stronger predictor of attachment perceptions than diagnosis alone, but subsequent analyses using psychosocial dysfunction instead of diagnostic category failed to find any significant interactions, with main effects only for psychosocial dysfunction and efficacy. However, it is worth noting the proportion of variance in attachment perceptions accounted for in each model (20-31%) was much larger than when diagnosis was used as the independent variable.

Discussion

Previous research has explored the impact of parenting a child with autism and has found that mothers of children with autism perceive their child's attachment to them as weaker compared to mothers of children with other disorders (Hoppes & Harris, 1990). The results from our study support this proposition and expand upon it to suggest that a child's level of psychosocial functioning is a better predictor of maternal perceptions of attachment than diagnosis alone. The results also suggest that a strong parenting alliance between primary caregivers is harder to achieve for mothers of children with autism compared to mothers of typically developing children. We also found maternal attachment orientation influences the extent to which mothers engage in positive parenting practices and are more efficacious as a parent, and the extent to which they report their child as demonstrating psychosocial dysfunction. Thus, a mother's own positive feelings about herself, her belief that she can cope with and manage stressful situations, and her view of herself as a strong and effective parent, all contribute to her perception of the relationship her child has with her, a view that is supported by previous research (Hastings & Brown, 2002; Kuhn & Carter, 2006).

Despite the potential limitations inherent in using a self-report, non-experimental methodology (McClelland & Judd, 1993), the results from this study have important implications both for mothers and for their children with an autism diagnosis. How a mother perceives her child's behavior and the relationship her child has with her is of crucial importance for her own wellbeing as well as for her child's wellbeing. More specifically, how securely attached a child is to their parents influences the quality of a child's future socialization (Coleman, 2003; Main & Weston, 1981). Given the inefficiencies in social interaction that exist among individuals with autism, strong maternal attachment is important for guiding future relationships for this group.

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