On Knowing and Being Known in the 4-Month Origins of Disorganized Attachment: Implications for the Origins of Dissociation

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The Origins of 12-Month Attachment: A Microanalysis of 4-Month Mother-Infant Interaction

Beebe, Jaffe, Markese, Buck, Chen, Cohen, Bahrick, Andrews, and Feldstein

Attachment & Human Development, 2010

Disorganized (D) Attachment is an important way to study trauma

- Mothers bring unresolved trauma, loss or abuse

- Intergenerational: M’s Adult Attachment Interview in pregnancy predicts infant attachment at 1 year (Fonagy, Steele & Steele).

- Incidence of D = 15% in community samples greater in risk samples
- Incidence of B (secure) = 55 - 65%

- M-I origins of D attachment = how exactly is it transmitted in process of dyadic communication?

Coding Criteria of Disorganized Attachment (12-18 mo) Fearful, Odd, Conflicted, Disorganized

• D = breakdown of an organized strategy for dealing with distress, leading to fear, apprehension, confusion.

Coding:
• Sequential contradictory behavior
• Simultaneous contradictory behavior, esp approach + avoid
• Undirected, misdirected, incomplete, interrupted, asymmetrical, mistimed, or anomalous behaviors
• Freezing, stilling, slowed movements
• Apprehension re parent

Procedural Expectancies

• Infants detect regularities in events, estimate probabilities of “if-then” sequences = contingencies → expectancies

• Anticipatory expectancies underlie social coordination
Contingency $\rightarrow$ Expectancy

- **Interactive regulation (contingency)** = expectancies of “how I affect you,” and “how you affect me.”
  $\rightarrow$ interactive efficacy, agency

- **Self-regulation (contingency)** = expectancies of self-predictability, self-stability, degree to which I can anticipate where I am tending

SYSTEMS MODEL OF INTERACTION

Infant Self-Regulation  Interactive Regulation  Mother Self-Regulation

M → I  I → M  \{ "regulation" = "contingency" \}

Predictability / probability

Beebe & Lachmann, 2002

Inferences about knowing and being known

• Based on our results, we make inferences about how 4-month future D infants come to know, and be known by, mother's mind, and to know their own minds.

• "Mind" is construed as expectancies of procedurally-organized action sequences.

• The future D infant
  - has difficulty feeling known by his mother,
  - has difficulty knowing his mother, and
  - has difficulty knowing himself,

especially at moments of distress.

Approach

• 4-month mother-infant face-to-face interaction, split-screen videotape

• Mother instructed to “play with your baby as you would at home, but without toys”

• Video coded on 1s time base, for mother and infant separately

These 4-month measures predicted

- 12-month infant attachment outcomes:
  - disorganized (N=17)
  - vs. secure (N=47)

- Low-risk community sample:
  well-educated, ethnically diverse, first-born infants, normal pregnancy, delivery, postpartum

4-Month Origins of 12-Month Disorganized Attachment

- Affect dysregulation
- Attention dysregulation
- Spatial dysregulation
- Touch dysregulation

Affect Dysregulation: Future D (vs. B) Infants

- More infant vocal and facial/vocal distress

- **Infant discrepant affect**: simultaneous positive face and negative voc in same sec

- **lowered infant facial-visual self-predictability**
  = destabilization of infant behavioral rhythms (*less intra-personal emotional coherence*)

Maternal “Denial” of Infant Distress

- Infant distress $\rightarrow$ M smile or surprise face
  $=$ *dyadic discordance, “conflict”*
  $=$ *failure of recognition of infant distress*

- Infants sense that M’s do not sense their distress $\rightarrow$ Infants alone with distress
Maternal Emotional Withdrawal from Distressed Infants

= lowered maternal facial-visual coordination with infant facial-visual ups and downs

= dyadic discordance ("conflict")
= failure of maternal recognition of positive and negative shifts

= lowered infant ability to predict maternal behavior from his own: lowered infant efficacy

Affective dysregulation in D mothers (cont.)

- maternal facial affect too steady-state = closing up her face; inscrutable

- (like Tronick’s still-face):

- (self-contingency too high, loss of variability)

(M fear of experiencing Infant’s distress?)
Attention dysregulation in D mothers

• Mothers *look away* more from infant’s face,
• Mothers *less predictable* looking at and away

= *disturbs mutual gaze*

(M can’t bear own distress, protects herself from exposure to infant distress?)

= *infants can’t rely on predictable maternal patterns of visual attention* → Disturbs infant expectancies → Infants feel not seen

Spatial Dysregulation in D Mothers

- M’s “loom” more into infant’s face, and loom unpredictably

- Loss of predictability → Disturbs infant creation of expectancies

- Both looming itself, and loss of predictability, might make M frightening for infant.

Maternal Intra-personal Discordance

• Mothers look away more: too far away visually
• Mothers loom in more: too close spatially
• Both unpredictable; both disturb mutual gaze
Touch Dysregulation in D Infants

• Infants touch less (all codes: skin, object, mother),
  – touch own skin less,
  – get “stuck” in states of “no touch.”

• Given infants highly distressed, infant arousal regulation through touch is disturbed

→ Lowered infant agency; helplessness

Touch Dysregulation in D Mothers

• D Mothers show lower coordination with infant touch patterns

• Disturbs infant interactive efficacy: infant can’t influence mother in tactile modality

Knowing and Being Known

- The organization of intimate relating is at stake in these early interactions:

- Involves fundamental issue of how the infant comes to know and be known by the mother’s mind.

Presymbolic Theory of Mind =

(1) Infant expectancies of procedurally organized action sequences: what will happen next (in partner, in self)?

(2) Infant’s perception/expectancy of correspondences in mother: does M share infant’s state? in time, form, intensity

(Stern, Trevarthen, Meltzoff - infant intersubjectivity)


Disturbances in Knowing and Being Known

• Winnicot’s sacred moment of knowing and being known:
  I know that you know that I know.

• Sander’s “moment of meeting:”
  A match between two partners such that the way one is known by oneself is matched by the way one is known by the other.

Difficulty feeling known by his mother:

a) As M smile/surprise to his distress: *distress states not sharable*

a) As M looks away repeatedly, unpredictably: *not seen*

a) As M lowers her facial-visual coordination with his facial-visual engagement: *not followed, not joined*

a) As M does not become more affectionate in her touch as he increases freq of his touch: his efforts to regulate through touch are *not sensed*
Difficulty knowing his mother

a) Difficulty integrating M’s smile to his distress: not coherent

a) Difficulty predicting what M will do next - in gaze, orientation, touch

c) As she closes up her face and becomes inscrutable

d) Difficulty “influencing” M in facial-visual engagement and touch

Difficulty knowing himself

• In his moments of discrepant affect
e.g. smile + whimper in same second

• As his facial-visual engagement, self-contingency is lowered = more difficult to sense own action tendencies

• As he has difficulty touching & touching own skin = disturbs visceral feedback, disturbs own agency through touch

Individual and Dyadic Loss of Coherence

• Maternal failures of recognition/forms of maternal threat

• Infants remain intensely distressed/alarmed

• Infant & maternal confusion/discordance

• Both partners: difficulty in knowing what the self feels & what the partner feels = emotional incoherence,

• *Which may disturb the fundamental coherence of the infant’s experience*

  → *bias toward dissociative defenses*

Implications for the Origins of Dissociation

Citation:

Origins of Dissociation

- Disorganized attachment at 12-18 months predicts young adult dissociation (Ogawa, Sroufe; Carlson; Lyons-Ruth)

- We propose that dissociative experiences during times of distress later in life potentially have their origins in infant experiences of
  - threat
  - failures of integration
  - failures of recognition

(1) Theory of origins of dissociation:
Unresolvable threat/fear; distress w/o repair:
Main & Solomon; Porges, Siegel, Schore

Our Data:

• Maternal threat faces, unpredictable loom
• Infant signs of alarm:
  - frantic distress
  - don’t touch me
  - freeze
  - loss of tonus

Theory of origins of dissociation: Disturbance in Integration

• A separation of mental processes: thoughts, emotions, memories, actions that are ordinarily integrated (Spiegel & Cardeña, 1991; Lyons-Ruth).

• Our data:
  – Infant smile + whimper
  – Mother look away + loom in
  – Infant distress $\rightarrow$ M smile/ M surprise

(3) Theory of origins of dissociation: Non-recognition trauma:
Non-recognition trauma early in development as key to adult dissociation (Bromberg, Lyons-Ruth)

• Our Data: Given infant is distressed:
  – M emotional withdrawal
  – M threat faces
  – M inscrutable faces
  – M looking away
  – M smile/surprise
  – M verbalize: “you don’t want to be that way”
Our findings “unpack” current theories of dissociation

• In these moments of dramatic and unsettling maternal threat faces, failures of recognition, and contradictory responses to infant distress –

• In these moments of infant painful and extreme agitated distress, alarm, freezing, and loss of tonus at 4 months –

• We are seeing an early infancy process that leads to 12-month disorganized attachment, setting a trajectory toward adult dissociation

Thank you