The Family Context of Disorganized Infant-Father Attachment

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Abstract

This study examined the correlates of disorganized infant-father attachment. Results indicated that fathers' work hours, paternal insensitivity, and maternal insensitivity were associated with disorganized attachment. Furthermore, difficult infant temperament and marital conflict interacted to predict disorganized attachment. Additionally, the influence of fathers' work hours on disorganized attachment was moderated by maternal sensitivity.

Introduction

Although a number of studies have examined the correlates of disorganized attachment for mothers and their infants (e.g., Carlson, 1998), very few studies have examined the development of disorganization with fathers. This study explored pre-birth and post-birth predictors of disorganized attachment in the infant-father relationship.

In the mother-child relationship, attachment disorganization has been primarily associated with maladaptive parenting behavior (e.g., Main & Hesse, 1990) and depression (e.g., Lyons-Ruth, Connell, Grunebaum, & Botein, 1990). The little work that has looked at fathers suggests that disorganized infant-father attachment may be associated with broader family functioning (e.g., marital conflict, Owen & Cox, 1997). Thus, the present study examined which aspects of the family may be predictive of father-child disorganization.

Research Questions

1) How are paternal and maternal behavior, child temperament, and marital interaction variables associated with disorganization in the father-child attachment relationship?

2) Do aspects of the family interact with each other to predict father-child attachment disorganization?

Method

Participants
• 62 children and their married parents
• Predominantly European-American, middle class, and well-educated.
• Participated in 3-phase longitudinal study: pre-birth (parents only), 3 months (home visit), and 13 months of age (lab visit).

Measures
Pre-birth
• **Demographic Information** (mother and father reports)
  • *Work Hours, Age, Education, Family Income*

3 months
• **Child Temperament** (combined mother, father, and observer reports)
  • Infant Characteristics Questionnaire (ICQ; Bates, Freeman, & Lounsbury, 1979)
  • Composite score: *Infant Difficulty*

• **Marital Interaction** (observational assessment)
  • Coded marital behavior while parents completed questionnaire and joint parenting task together
  • Two composite scores:
    • *Positive Interaction*
    • *Marital Conflict*

• **Parent-Child Interaction** (separate mother-child and father-child observational assessments)
  • Coded *Parenting Sensitivity* during 5-minute free play episode.

13 months
• **Demographic Information** (mother and father reports)
  • *Work Hours, Age, Education, Family Income*

• **Father-Child Attachment**
  • Strange Situation Procedure (Ainsworth et al., 1978)
    • *Total Disorganization Score*
    • *4-category classification*
      • 7% Avoidant, 64% Secure, 11% Resistant, 18% Disorganized

Results

1) How are paternal and maternal behavior, child temperament, and marital interaction variables associated with disorganization in the father-child attachment relationship?

**Correlational Analyses** *(using total disorganization score)*

• Disorganized attachment was associated with less sensitive paternal behavior at 3 months ($r = -.36$, $p < .05$) and fathers working more hours both pre-birth ($r = .41$, $p < .01$) and during the first year post-birth ($r = .33$, $p < .05$).

• Moreover, disorganized attachment with father was associated with less sensitive maternal behavior at 3 months ($r = -.45$, $p < ..01$).

• Contrary to expectations, neither marital interaction nor child temperament were significantly associated with disorganized attachment.

• Furthermore, independent samples t-tests indicated that infants who were classified as disorganized (using 4-category classification) had fathers who showed less sensitivity and worked more hours (pre-birth and post-birth) than fathers of non-disorganized infants (see following figures).

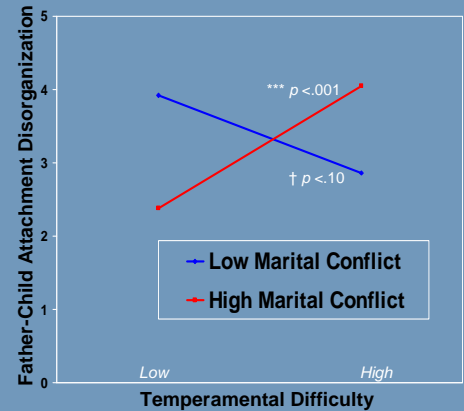**Paternal Sensitivity and Disorganized Attachment**

*$t = -2.52$, $p < .05$
Legend: Disorganized / Not Disorganized
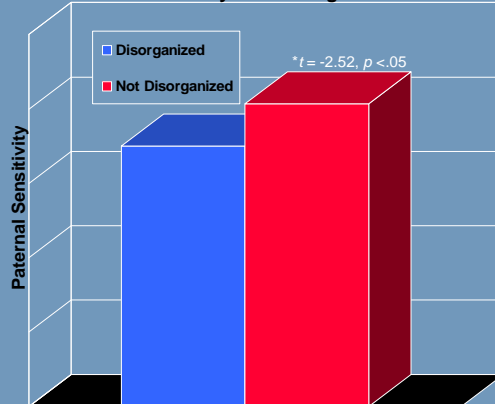
Fathers' Work Hours and Disorganized Attachment
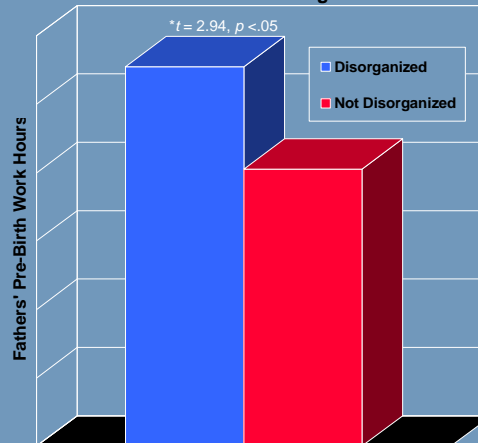
*$t = 2.94$, $p < .05$
Legend: Disorganized / Not Disorganized

*2) Do aspects of the family interact with each other to predict father-child attachment disorganization?*

• Examination of the interaction between marital conflict and difficult temperament indicated that difficult infant temperament only predicted the total disorganized attachment score in the presence of high marital conflict.

• This interaction was significant, $\beta = .29$, $\Delta R^2 = .08$, $p < .05$. (see following figure).

Father-Child Attachment Disorganization vs. Temperamental Difficulty
*** $p < .001$ † $p < .10$
Low Marital Conflict / High Marital Conflict

• Examination of the interaction between fathers' work hours and maternal sensitivity revealed that mothers' sensitivity moderated the association between fathers' work hours and infant-father total attachment disorganization score ($\beta = -.30$, $\Delta R^2 = .07$, $p < .05$.).

• Fathers' work hours were more strongly associated with infant-father attachment disorganization when mothers' showed low levels of parenting sensitivity (see following figure).

Father-Child Attachment Disorganization vs. Fathers' Pre-Birth Work Hours
*** $p < .001$ † $p < .10$
Low Maternal Sensitivity / High Maternal Sensitivity
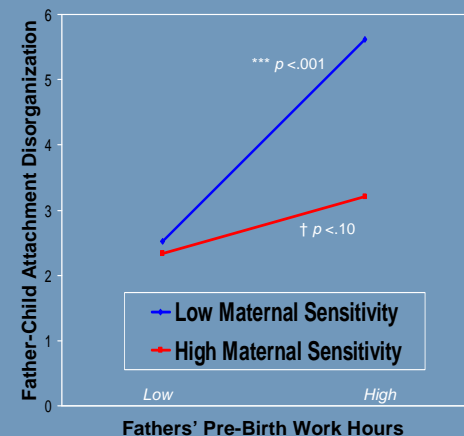
Summary

• When fathers worked longer hours both before and after the birth of their child, infants were more likely to exhibit disorganized attachment.

• Disorganized infant-father attachment was also more prevalent in families where mothers and/or fathers were less sensitive in their parenting.

• Infant difficult temperament was associated with disorganized attachment only when families showed high levels of marital conflict, but not in families with more harmonious marital interaction.

• Fathers' work hours were more strongly associated with attachment disorganization when mothers were low on parental sensitivity.