Pathways to Mother-toddler Role Reversal: Mother's Unresolved Trauma and Disorganized Attachment

Jenny Macfie, Caroline Mann, Laura Nolan, Christopher Watkins & Jillian Weaver

Abstract
This longitudinal study examined pathways from maternal unresolved trauma and mother-infant disorganized attachment to mother-toddler role reversal. Role reversal is a relationship disturbance in which a child takes on an inappropriate parental, peer or spousal role towards his or her parent. In a normative sample, N=138, we assessed mothers' unresolved trauma and lack of memory for childhood prior to the child's birth, disorganized attachment at 12 months, and mother-toddler role reversal at age two. In the sample as a whole, mother's lack of memory predicted attachment disorganization with her infant and disorganization predicted mother-toddler role reversal. For boys (but not girls), mother's unresolved trauma and her lack of memory predicted disorganization with her infant, and disorganization again predicted mother-toddler role reversal.

Introduction

Role reversal:
- Role reversal reflects a disturbance in the parent-child relationship in which a parent looks to a child to meet his or her unmet needs (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973), and the child takes in part the role of parent, spouse, or peer (Kerig, 2003, April)
- Role reversal is prevalent in high risk samples (Cummings, Hennessy, Rabideau, & Cicchetti, 1994; Macfie et al., 1999) and predicts attention, externalizing & social problems (Carlson, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1995; Macfie, Houts, McElwain, & Cox, in press)
- Role reversal is also transmitted intergenerationally (Macfie, McElwain, Flouts, & Cox, in press)

Pathways to role reversal:
- The stage-salient issue of the toddler period is self development (Cicchetti, 1984; Sroufe & Rutter, 1984)
- Role reversal represents a disturbance in self development as a child focuses on a parent's needs rather than his or her own
- Therefore a disturbance in attachment in infancy, the stage-salient issue prior to self development, may potentiate pathways to role reversal in the toddler period

Prior Research:
- Mother's unresolved trauma from her own childhood predicted disorganized attachment with her child in infancy (Main & Hesse, 1990)
- Disorganized attachment in infancy predicted role reversal at age 6 (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985)

Gaps:
- There have been no studies on the:
  - effect of mother's lack of memory (which may in part reflect amnesia for unresolved trauma) on disorganized attachment
  - effect of disorganized attachment in infancy on role reversal as early as the toddler period when self development is the stage-salient issue
  - longitudinal relationship between mother's unresolved trauma, disorganized attachment, & role reversal
  - the role of gender differences

The Current Study:
- Tested a single longitudinal model that included unresolved trauma, lack of memory, disorganized attachment and role reversal. See Figure 1 for the conceptual model.

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Hypotheses:
• Mother's unresolved trauma would predict disorganized attachment with her infant
• Mother's lack of memory would predict disorganized attachment with her infant
• Disorganized attachment in infancy would predict role reversal in toddler period
• Gender differences were also explored

Figure 1. Conceptual model

Method

Participants:
• N= 138 mothers from a rural area of the southern US
• 75 girls, 63 boys
• Low to middle SES
• 97% European American, 3% African American

Procedures & Measures:
• Mothers' unresolved trauma and lack of memory
  • Adult Attachment Interview (George, Kaplan, & Main, 1984)
    o Unresolved trauma (e.g., sexual or physical abuse) was coded on a 9-point scale,
    o Lack of memory was coded on a 9-point scale (e.g., when mothers stated, "I don't remember").
    Conceptualized here to include both an attempt to block the interview and amnesia for trauma.
  o Inter-rater reliability: 87% agreement on overall attachment classifications

Mother's disorganized attachment with her infant:
• The Strange Situation (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978)
• Infants were assessed on a 9-point scale of disorganization (Main & Hesse, 1990)
• Inter-rater reliability: 91% on attachment classifications

Mother's role reversal with her toddler:
• Qualitative Ratings of Parent/Child Interaction at 24 mos (Cox & Paley, 1997) was used to code role reversal during a videotaped puzzle-solving session
• The role reversal scale combined two boundary dissolution scales (Sroufe et al., 1985)
• The 7-point scale assesses degree to which parent & child maintain appropriate role relationships (e.g., role reversal is scored when mother defers to the child to control the session)
Results

Descriptive Statistics:
- See Table 1
- See Tables 2 & 3 for intercorrelations among variables

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the whole sample and by child gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N (girls, boys)</th>
<th>M (girls, boys)</th>
<th>SD (girls, boys)</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAI Mother's unresolved trauma</td>
<td>135 (73, 62)</td>
<td>1.42 (1.32, 1.55)</td>
<td>1.06 (0.88, 1.24)</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAI Mother's lack of memory</td>
<td>138 (75, 63)</td>
<td>2.59 (2.48, 2.71)</td>
<td>2.01 (1.97, 2.06)</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother-infant disorganization</td>
<td>131 (71, 60)</td>
<td>3.49 (3.50, 3.48)</td>
<td>2.19 (2.27, 2.11)</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother-toddler role reversal</td>
<td>135 (75, 60)</td>
<td>2.20 (2.16, 2.25)</td>
<td>1.45 (1.38, 1.28)</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent education (years)</td>
<td>138 (75, 63)</td>
<td>13.80 (13.7, 13.91)</td>
<td>1.96 (1.98, 1.95)</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income ($ per month)</td>
<td>138 (75, 63)</td>
<td>1,191 (1,189, 1,194)</td>
<td>448 (461, 435)</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. AAI = Adult Attachment Interview.

Table 2. Intercorrelations for the whole sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
<th>5.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. AAI Mother's unresolved trauma</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.03 (135)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. AAI Mother's lack of memory</td>
<td>-.03 (128)</td>
<td>.18* (131)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mother-infant disorganization</td>
<td>.06 (128)</td>
<td>.10 (135)</td>
<td>.21* (129)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Mother-toddler role reversal</td>
<td>.01 (132)</td>
<td>.10 (135)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.14 (138)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Parent education (years)</td>
<td>-.03 (135)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Family income ($ per month)</td>
<td>-.05 (135)</td>
<td>-.11 (138)</td>
<td>-.07 (131)</td>
<td>-.23** (135)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p <.05; **p <.01.
Note. AAI = Adult Attachment Interview. Sample sizes are shown in parentheses.

Table 3. Intercorrelations by child gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
<th>5.</th>
<th>6.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. AAI Mother's unresolved trauma</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.09 (62)</td>
<td>.23 (59)</td>
<td>-.12 (59)</td>
<td>-.04 (62)</td>
<td>-.06 (62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. AAI Mother's lack of memory</td>
<td>-.03 (73)</td>
<td>.22 (60)</td>
<td>.10 (60)</td>
<td>-.13 (63)</td>
<td>-.09 (63)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mother-infant disorganization</td>
<td>-.14 (69)</td>
<td>.15 (71)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.32* (58)</td>
<td>-.14 (60)</td>
<td>-.18 (60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Mother-toddler role reversal</td>
<td>.12 (73)</td>
<td>.10 (75)</td>
<td>.14 (71)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.24 (60)</td>
<td>-.33* (60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Parent education (years)</td>
<td>-.02 (73)</td>
<td>-.15 (75)</td>
<td>-.01 (71)</td>
<td>-24** (75)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.56*** (63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Family income ($ per month)</td>
<td>-.04 (73)</td>
<td>-.13 (75)</td>
<td>.01 (71)</td>
<td>-.14 (75)</td>
<td>.66*** (75)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p <.05; **p <.01; ***p <.001.
Note. AAI = Adult Attachment Interview. Girls are below and boys above the diagonal. Sample sizes are shown in parentheses.

Model Testing:
- Used a SEM framework
- Education and income were covariates

In the sample as whole:
- $X^2(6, N= 138) = 3.53, p=.74$
- CFI = 1, TLI = 1, IFI = 1, RMSEA=.00

- $Mother's lack of memory predicted disorganized attachment at 12 months$
- $Disorganized attachment predicted mother-toddler role reversal$
- However, mother's unresolved trauma did not predict disorganized attachment (See Figure 2).
• Child gender.
  *χ2(df = 1) = 138, p = .094. CFI = 1.0 - 1.111 - 1.1, IFI = 1.00. Rh9SEA = .00.
• For boys (but not for girls)
  o. The lack of memory predicted disorganized attachment at 12 months (other's lack of memory predicted disorganized attachment at 12 months). 
  o. Unresolved trauma predicted disorganized attachment.
  o. Disorganized attachment predicted mother-toddler role reversal (See Figure 3).

Figure 2. Standardized coefficients for whole sample, n = 138.

Mother's lack of memory

Infant's disorganized attachment

Mother's unresolved trauma

Toddler role reversal

0.19* 0.20*

Infant's disorganized attachment with mother

0.06

* p < .05

Figure 3. Standardized coefficients for boys, n = 63.

Mother's lack of memory

Infant's disorganized attachment

Mother's unresolved trauma

Toddler role reversal

0.26* 0.32**

infant's disorganized attachment with mother

0.24*

* p < .05; ** p < .01
Discussion

Summary:
• These findings are the first to demonstrate an association between disorganized attachment in infancy and subsequent role reversal as early as age ?
• Findings confirm an association between mother's unresolved trauma and disorganized attachment, but only for boys.
• In addition, mother's lack of memory predicted disorganized attachment in the sample as a whole and for boys.

Why these results were stronger for boys:
• Boys more often than girls are involved in seductive type of role reversal (Sroufe & Ward, 1980).
• A seductive role reversal is often accompanied by physical abuse, which is associated with compulsive compliance (Crittenden & DiLalla, 1988).

Implications:
• Interventions to prevent role reversal should include helping the mother to process past trauma and to intervene at the level of mother-child attachment.
• From a developmental psychopathology perspective.
• Failure at one stage-salient issue makes failure at the next more likely.
• Atypical development informs normative development.

References


