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Exploring the impact of child birth on mother's attachment representation

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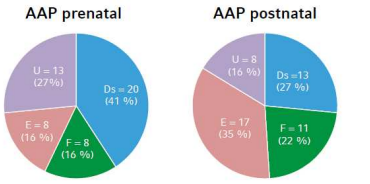
INTRODUCTION

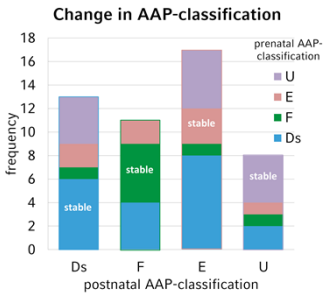
The research on stability of adult attachment representations showed that Bowlby`s prototype hypothesis can be supported by empirical data (Fraley & Brumbaugh, 2004). Still there is no determinism; and sustaining, as well as temporal categorical (e.g. Crowell, Treboux & Waters, 2002; Cozzarelli et al., 2003) and dimensional changes (e.g. Simpsons et al., 2003) were observed, suggesting an influence of critical life events or transitions on adult attachment representations. The birth of the first child and with that the transition to parenthood is seen as a critical life event (e.g. Simpsons et al., 2003) with its impact on the mother's emotional experience (Behringer, 2009), behavioural and cognitive systems and partnership (Kohn et al., 2012). Mechanisms through which change in attachment representations might occur, could be the discrepancy between IWM-model generated expectations and new experiences (Simpson et al., 2002), re-experiencing of traumatic, challenging childhood experience followed by possible reorganization in attachment representation (Bowlby, 1988). Research until today showed a possible shift in attachment representation following child birth (e.g. Simpsons et al., 2003).

OBJECTIVES

Further knowledge about the convertibility / vulnerability of IWM to life circumstances and factors of stability vs. change shall be gained. We hypothesize to observe a comparable lower stability of classification through transition to parenthood. Furthermore we expect secure attachment representations to be more stable than insecure, with the unresolved category showing the highest instability (e.g. Crowell, Treboux and Waters, 2003).



stability = 36,7 %		AAP postnatal Ds	F	E	U	∑ prenatal
AAP prenatal	Ds	6	4	8	2	20
	F	1	5	1	1	8
	E	2	2	3	1	8
	U	4	0	5	4	13
∑ postnatal		13	11	17	8	49



SAMPLE & METHOD

The mother's general IWM was administered prenatally (Ø 7 weeks prior to child birth; SD = 5,83; Min = 1; Max = 28) and about one year postnatally (Ø 14,57 months; SD = 2,54; Min = 11; Max = 20) using the Adult Attachment Projective Picture System (AAP, George & West, 2012). Time between the two interviews was in average 73,82 weeks (SD = 11,93; Min = 53; Max = 98). Mother's were screened for PTBS (PDS, IES), possible traumatic experience in childhood (TAQ), postnatal depression (EPDS) and traumatic appraisal of delivery (IES). 98 AAP interviews of *N* = 49 mothers (all expecting their first child, 5 single mothers) of the treatment-as-usual group of the SAFE® evaluation study, conducted at the Dr. von Hauner Children Hospital, were categorized into secure (F), dismissive (Ds), enmeshed (E) or unresolved (U) by two reliable coders, while both interviews of one mother were coded by the same coder (blind to participant code). At time of birth mothers were aged Ø 34,29 years (SD = 4,66; Min = 22, Max = 42). Their socio-economic and educational background was comparable high.

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RESULTS

Prenatal and postnatal distribution differ significantly from the AAI-distribution (4 categories) found by van Ijzendoorn, 1995 with a sample of *N* = 4454 (2012) (prenatal: X^2 = 22,97; p < 0,001; postnatal: X^2 = 43,08 ; p < 0,001) with prenatal less secure and more insecure / unresolved representations which might be a result of sample-selection effects. General stability of attachment representations was found to be 36,7 % (secure = 62,5 %; dismissive = 30,0 % ; enmeshed = 37,5 %; unresolved = 33,77 %) with the two distributions differing significantly (X^2 = 15,62; p < 0,001). Shifts were observed predominantly to an enmeshed attachment representation (45,2 % of shifts; 22,6 % to Ds; 19,4 % to F; 12,9 % to U). Exploration of change vs. stability-promoting factors shows neither a significant difference between the groups "NoChange" vs. "Change" in representation nor the three groups with instable classifications "more secure", "less secure" and "E↔Ds". But descriptive inspection suggests higher scores for the "Change"-group and particularly the "less secure" group in prenatal trauma symptoms load and postnatal trauma symptoms regarding the birth. Surprisingly mothers in the group "more secure" report descriptively higher possible traumatic experience in childhood and receive higher EPDS-scores.

	N	Age Mother[1] M (SD)	Time-lag btw. AAPs M (SD) in weeks	Age Child 2nd AAP M (SD) in months	TAQ stress M (SD)	IES prenatal M (SD)	IES reg. birth M (SD)	EPDS after birth M (SD)
NoChange	18	34.94 (4.50)	71.33 (12.35)	13.72 (2.27)	13.60 (10.29)	9.38 (15.91)	6.82 (7.38)	4.62 (2.66)
T-Test/U-Test on Mean-difference btw groups		–	–	p < 0,1 *	–	–	–	–
Change	31	33.90 (4.78)	75.26 (11.64)	15.06 (2.59)	11.51 (9.69)	15.41 (19.04)	10.97 (13.50)	7.17 (5.43)
more secure E/Ds → F or U → E/Ds	15	35.20 (4.49)	71.87 (10.34)	14.53 (2.48)	13.98 (10.30)	8.33 (12.60)	10.73 (11.62)	8.56 (5.68)
less secure F → E/Ds or E/Ds → U	6	32.00 (2.61)	79.00 (14.57)	15.17 (2.99)	10.86 (9.72)	21.60 (21.78)	13.50 (9.80)	5.00 (2.31)
E ↔ Ds	10	33.10 (5.92	78.10 (11.39)	15.80 (2.62)	8.20 (8.55)	6.86 (11.67)	9.80 (12.19)	6.40 (6.84)
ANOVA/Kruskal-Wallis-Test		–	–	–	–	–	–	–

[1] Variables were tested on normal distribution. „Age child at 2nd AAP", „IES prenatal", „IES reg. birth"and „EPDS after birth" don't show a normal distribution. Non-parametric tests were used.

DISCUSSION

We found the secure group to have the highest stability. The other representations showed equally low stability. The observed stability of attachment representations is lower than in meta-analytic studies with categorical attachment measures (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007: 70 % stability in attachment category; Crowell, Treboux & Waters, 2002: 78% stability in AAI-classification) as well as lower as the test-retest-reliability of AAP of ~ 85 % (George & West, 2012) which hints at the changing impact of a child's birth. The predominant shift to an enmeshed IWM of attachment (characterized by an fluctuation between seeking for proximity and angry denial of this need: George & West, 2012) during transition to parenthood suggests an „unsettledness" in this time, during which existing plans, behaviour and emotion regulation strategies are challenged. Clear factors for change and direction of change in the person itself could not yet be detected – one reason might be the small total sample and sub-group sizes.

The question if temporary or sustaining changes occur stays unclear. Further investigation will therefore address the mother's attachment representation three months after child birth to analyse underlying patterns of change and stability.

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