

# Do mental health and partnership satisfaction influence first-time parents' postnatal attachment to their child?

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THEORY

STUDY

SUMMARY

## Aim of the Study and Research Questions

The present study examines the influence of first-time parents' mental health and partnership satisfaction on their postnatal attachment to the child, with partnership satisfaction as a possible mediating variable between mental health and postnatal attachment.

- 1) Is mothers' and fathers' mental health associated with their postnatal attachment to the child?
- 2) Is partnership satisfaction mediating the associations between parents' mental health and their postnatal attachment to the child?

## Introduction

In the context of early parent-child relationships and parent-child attachment, parents' mental health characteristics are essential (Sevigny & Loutzenhiser, 2006; Perry et al., 2011). Particularly, parents' depressive symptoms reach the highest rate in the time period between three and six months postpartum (Paulson & Bazemore, 2010). Nevertheless, the interpersonal determinants of the association between parents' mental health and postnatal attachment to the child are not fully understood.

According to the *spill over hypothesis*, negative attitudes, conflict or stress in parents' partnership can affect the parent-child relationship negatively (Erel & Burman, 1995; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Cox & Payley, 1997). Especially fathers have difficulties in disentangling negative feelings within their partnerships from their relationship to the child (e.g., Chen et al., 2008). Therefore, partnership satisfaction may determine the association between parents' mental health and postnatal attachment. Compared to maternal mental health, paternal mental health has received less attention from researchers and clinicians, and the effects of depression and stress among new fathers are poorly understood.

## Methods

Sample: N = 104 families

Mean age of mothers: 22 years ( $SD = 5.4$ , Range 14 – 40).  
Mean age of fathers: 24 years ( $SD = 5.8$ , Range 16 – 43).

### Assessment of Parents' Characteristics

Standardized face-to-face interviews were conducted with mothers and fathers separately from each other at home six months after their infant's birth.

**Life Satisfaction Questionnaire** (LSQ; Fahrenberg, Myrtek, Schumacher, & Brähler, 2000): Partnership satisfaction was measured on a four-point scale by the seven-item subscale "Marriage and Partnership". Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.88 for mothers and 0.86 for fathers.

**Depression Anxiety Stress Scales** (DASS 21-item short form; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995): Seven items rated on a four-point scale assessed mothers' and fathers' scores on depression, anxiety and stress. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  ranged between 0.81 and 0.86 for mothers, and between 0.81 and 0.84 for fathers.



### Assessment of Parent-Child Attachment

**Maternal and Paternal Postnatal Attachment Scale** (M/PPAS; Condon and Corkindale, 1998):

The maternal and paternal PAS assesses early mother-child- as well as father-child-attachment with 19 items on three subscales: joy in common interaction with the child, absence of hostility and quality of postnatal attachment. The items were rated on a four-point scale. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  ranged between 0.69 and 0.74 for mothers, and between 0.71 and 0.77 for fathers.

## Results

Most mothers (98%) and fathers (95%) were born in Germany.

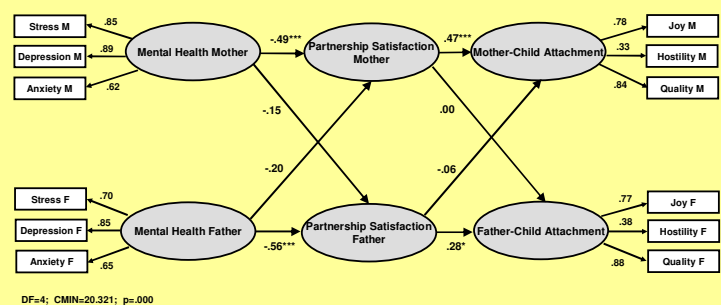
**Partnership duration** was approximately 27 months ( $SD = 31.8$ , Range 1.3 – 240.0), with most of the couples (84%) not being married.

Concerning **paternal residence and relatedness**, 75% of the biological fathers and 39% of the non-biological fathers lived in the same household with their children; 25% of the biological and 61% of the non-biological fathers were living separately from their children. Nevertheless, 90% of fathers reported daily contact with the infant (7% 3-6 times per week, 3% 1-2 times per week).

### Psychosocial and Financial Risk Factors

	Mothers	Fathers
Less than high school diploma	51%	53%
No vocational training	74%	52%
Unemployed	58%	62%
Indebted	53%	57%
Experiences of violence	59%	50%
Abuse in childhood	42%	19%
Drug abuse/consumption	30%	19%

### Actor-Partner Mediator Model



### Standardized Indirect Actor Effects

R <sup>2</sup>	Mental Health Mother	Mental Health Father
Mother-child attachment	-.37 - .05**	-.19 - .09
Father-child attachment	-.17 - .61	-.34 - .10

### Model Comparison for Maternal Mental Health Testing Mediation

CAIC	Indirect Model	Full Model	Direct Model
Mother-child attachment	483.544	485.801	501.761

## Discussion and Conclusion

In line with our expectations, mother's mental health was negatively related to her postnatal attachment. Contrary to our hypothesis, father's mental health was not related to his postnatal attachment to the child. Only for mothers, partnership satisfaction mediated the association between mental health and postnatal attachment. Therefore, the results indicated an indirect link between mother's mental health and her attachment to the six months-old child, which was partially explained by the influence of her partnership satisfaction. None of the partner effects reached statistical significance.

These results have important implications for early childhood interventions in vulnerable families concerning the strengthening of parents' partnership, because of its beneficial effects on the mother-child relationship. Positive feelings towards the child are essential for the prevention of child abuse and neglect, and the promotion of positive child rearing behavior.

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