THE ROLE OF EMPATHY, REFLECTIVE FUNCTIONING, AND INFANT TEMPERAMENT IN THE PRACTICE OF MATERNAL MIND-MINDEDNESS

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Mind-mindedness is the caregiver’s tendency to respond to the infant with mind-related comments based on understanding the infant’s internal states (Meins et al., 2001). Maternal mind-mindedness predicts children’s secure attachment and better socio-cognitive development (e.g., Meins et al., 2013), however little is known about what individual factors in mothers and infants determine levels of maternal mind-mindedness. The present study aims to explore relations between mothers’ dispositional empathy, parental reflective functioning (PRF), infant temperament, and mind-mindedness.

Sixty-three British mother-infant dyads (aged 4 to 8 months) participated in this study. Ten minute free-play sessions between mothers and their infants were recorded to assess maternal mind-mindedness towards their infant in the laboratory setting. Mothers’ empathy and PRF were measured by self-report questionnaires (Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy, QCAE: Reniers, Corcoran, & Drake, 2011; Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire, PRFQ: Fonagy et al., 2016). Infant temperament was assessed using a laboratory-based measure.

According to the analysed data, mother’s interest and curiosity on their infant’s mental states was positively related to mother’s cognitive empathy and infant’s difficult temperament. However, a high level of certainty about mental states, which is one of subscales of PRFQ, was related to a low level of proximal responsivity of affective empathy. Lastly, a non-mentalising stance of PRFQ was positively related to emotion contagion of affective empathy. As mind-mindedness is being coded, further associations with mind-mindedness will be examined.

These findings may first suggest the relationships between parent’s mentalising ability to reflect their children’s mental process (PRF), and the parent’s empathy. Given that Meins et al.’s (2014) proposal that mind-mindedness is a quality of close relationships rather than a trait-like construct, future findings of mind-mindedness in the study may present different associations from PRF, and thereby suggest further understanding about parental mentalisation and possible antecedents of mind-mindedness.