

CHICAGO INSTITUTE FOR CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK

MEANING AND ATTACHMENT BETWEEN MOTHERS AND TODDLERS

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## CHAPTER 1

### PROBLEM FORMULATION

#### General Problem

It is taken for granted in most forms of psychotherapy that the past influences current behavior. It is also an accepted part of psychodynamic clinical thinking that unless an individual emotionally and cognitively becomes aware of past unmet developmental needs, these failed developmental experiences may be sought in contemporary relationships. If such needs are not met in current relationships, then archaic patterns of attempting to meet these needs may become activated in the current relationships. Current relationships would include those with one's children. Thus, the past that is represented in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral psychic structures within the parent, influences current mother-child interactions.

Recent research (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985) suggests that if a mother has an insecure attachment history with her own mother, then there is a significant possibility that she will have an insecure relationship with her own child. Ricks' (1985) work supports Main et al. findings.

However, Ricks, also found that mothers who were eventually able to take an autonomous stance towards their own mothers, despite insecure childhood histories of attachment, had secure attachments with their children. The research cited above traced attachment patterns across generations.

Additionally, Main et al. (1985) study sought to assess the mother's internal working model of attachment. Main et al. conducted work that began to trace how an intrapsychic phenomena (e.g., a representation of attachment experience) is transmitted intergenerationally. This study builds on Main et al. and Ricks's (1985) work, by investigating the relationship between the mother's internal working model of her attachment experience and how she currently relates to her toddler.

This project evolved from the author's interest in three areas: (a) clinical treatment, (b) mother-infant interactions, and (c) the role that intrapsychic representational structures regarding attachment play in regards to the mother's interpreting meaning from an infant's behavior and possibly influencing that behavior. Although, Main and Ricks have demonstrated the importance of a mother's prior attachment experience on the attachment experience of her infant, there is very little research literature available on the cognitive and affective meaning that the toddler's behavior has for a mother. Similarly, there is little research literature available on how meaning

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drawn from a toddler's behavior might be linked to the intrapsychic representation of a mother's attachment history.

Perhaps an insecurely attached mother has an insecurely attached infant because the intrapsychic representations of her own experience cause the mother to interpret the infant's behavior in a certain manner. These interpretations then impact on the mother's ability to act as a secure base for her child. This study attempted to explore how a mother's subjective attachment experience with her own mother can impact on her view of her toddler and the meaning she draws from her toddler's behavior. This study attempted to bridge the intrapsychic representational world of the mother with the observational focus of dyadic interactions.

#### Problem for Research

The purpose of this study was to explore how a mother's internal working model of her own attachment experience affects the sensitivity of her current interactions with her toddler, as well as the meaning that she draws from the toddler's behavior. The research examines the following components of attachment: (a) internal working model of the mother's attachment experience, (b) sensitivity of interaction with the toddler on attachment related tasks, and (c) meaning drawn from the

interaction with the toddler. The following hypotheses were formulated:

1. A mother who has a secure internal working model of attachment that is primarily accepting and coherent as indicated by a combined score on the Maternal Acceptance subscale of the Mother-Father-Peer Scale (Epstein, 1983) and a clinical interview will more sensitively interact with her toddler, around attachment related tasks, as measured by observers' ratings. The interactions of the mother's sensitivity to the toddler would be rated on a modified Ainsworth Sensitivity Scale (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974).

A mother who has an insecure internal working model of attachment that is non-accepting and incoherent, as measured by the Maternal Acceptance subscale of the Mother-Father-Peer Scale, and a clinical interview will interact with decreased sensitivity with her toddler, as measured by observer's ratings on a modified Ainsworth Sensitivity Scale.

2. The themes that have salient meaning to a mother when discussing her experience of attachment with her own mother, will reappear when she discusses her experience with her toddler, as well as when she interprets the meaning of her toddler's attachment behavior. Other themes which may have relevance (e.g., toddler temperament and ameliorative attachment experiences) may also appear.

An underlying assumption of this work follows: mothers draw meaning about themselves and others based on the multitude of interactions with their own mothers. The behavior of the mother's toddler will be interpreted within the context of the mother's meaning system based on her own relationship history.

#### Applicability of This Research to Clinical Social Work

Being as specific as possible about how the mother sees the child and how the past is influencing the current interaction could have enormous benefit to the field of social work. Since the research suggests (Crockenberg, 1987; Main et al., 1985) that mothers and toddlers begin to form stable patterns of relating to each other by the second year of life, any information on how the mother perceives her toddler would be a helpful adjunct to psychotherapy for mother/infant problems. Clarifying the internal representational landscape of mothers who are members of high risk dyads may suggest commonalities in unconscious schematizing in these mothers. This information may be applicable for developing assessment procedures for high risk dyads. The results of this study might also inform mother/toddler psychotherapy practice.

Main et al.'s (1985) work further demonstrates that the mother's internal representation of her own experience of being parented has strong implications for the attachment

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relationship with the mother's own infant. This attachment relationship appears to stay stable throughout the child's first six years of life. Thus, having information on the mother's internal working model of her own childhood attachment experiences, as well as the meaning that she is drawing from her child's behavior, could serve as a tool for prevention and early intervention with those dyads at high risk for attachment difficulties.

Although Main et al. work has furthered our understanding of intergenerational transmission of attachment behavior patterns, it does not capture the meaning of the infant's behavior for the mother. Zeanah (1988) underscores this point with the following example. A controlling dyadic interaction may represent one mother's emotionally distant attempts to see her child achieve. This would express a wish for the child to be independent. A similar appearing interaction may represent another mother's efforts to prove her necessity to the infant's well being. This represents a wish for the child to be dependent. Zeanah continues: "Thus the hope is that supplementing interactional assessments with representational assessments may provide a richer understanding of the mother-infant relationship" (p. 4).

Additional uses for this research are as follows: Since treatment of clinical infant problems focus on the parent and usually not the infant, treatment would focus on

the parent's representation of self, of her infant, or of the interaction of the two. Having a measure of mothers' representations of their childhood attachment experiences and the meanings initially attributed to their child's behavior could serve as a before and after assessment during treatment. Finally, the parent's subjective experience of the toddler provides the context that will form the child's own sense of self. The caregiver's accurate reading of the child will help the child to construct a sense of himself or herself.

#### Theoretical Framework

The work of infant researcher Stern (1985, 1989) guided the current investigation. The following concepts developed by Stern were emphasized: (a) observable interactive events act as a bridge between the subjective worlds of infant and mother, (b) intrapsychic representation is built through repeated interactions between mother and child, and (c) there are hierarchically arranged units of interactive experience that become encoded in memory and guide behavior, affect, and cognition.

#### Stern's View of the Subjective Self

Stern's (1985, 1989) theorizing has led him to postulate the development of five domains of the self. These include the following:

1. The emergent self, which begins to form from

birth. The emergent self is that part of the self that organizes experience.

2. The core self, which begins to form around 2 months of age. The core self is an organizing perspective that allows the infant a sense of feeling integrated within a distinct and coherent body, having control over his actions, a sense of his affectivity and continuity in time.

3. The subjective self, which will be described in more detail below.

4. The verbal self, which emerges around 18 months. The verbal self is an organization that allows the infant to share personal and world knowledge through the shared medium of language.

5. The narrative self develops around age three. This organization allows the child to construct his own personal story of his life. This study explores toddlers who are currently forming the subjective sense of self.

Stern (1985) describes the period between 7 and 18 months as the age span when the subjective self develops. During this time, infants come to the realization that the contents of their minds, their intentions and their affective states are shareable with others. The subject matter at this developmental time can be as simple and important as an intention to act (e.g., "I want a cookie"), a feeling state ("This is exciting"), or a focus of attention ("Look at that toy"). Only when infants sense

that others hold or entertain a mental state that is similar to their own is the sharing of subjective experience or intersubjectivity possible. For this experience to occur, there must be some shared framework of meaning and a means of communication such as gesture, posture or facial expression. Not only at this age is physical intimacy possible, but psychic intimacy also becomes possible.

This domain of self will continue to expand throughout the lifespan. Basch (1988) suggests that those individuals suffering from narcissistic personality disorders would have deficits in the domain of the subjective self. Parents of such individuals had difficulty responding to the subjective expressions and feeling states of the toddler. This would be an age that would be crucial for mothers and toddlers to share psychic meaning. An incapacity in mother's ability to read their toddlers behavior at this point could have long lasting implications for the relationship and the development of the subjective self within the toddler.

At this age, the infant is pre-verbal. The mother must convey to the infant a sense that his internal experience is understood. A mother's responsiveness to the infant is crucial to conveying a sense of being with the infant emotionally. If the mother continuously misinterprets the toddler's meanings, then attachment difficulties may ensue. Stern (1985) describes a process

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called attunement that allows mothers and infants to share internal feeling states. Affect attunement is the performance of behaviors that express the quality of feeling of a shared affect state. However, the exact behavioral expression is not imitated. For example, a 10-month-old girl finally gets a block in a toy cup. She looks to her mother, throws her head back and with a forceful arm flap, raises herself partly off the ground in a flurry of exuberance. The mother says, "Yes, thatta girl." The "YES" is intoned with much stress. It echoes, in explosive rise, the girl's fling and posture. The attunement shows the toddler that mom reads the spirit of her internal feeling state.

Stern suggests that the mother who is preoccupied with her own unmet developmental needs may be unable to attune to the needs of her infant. Stern (1985) describes how a mother-child interactive episode is the bridge between the infant's and mother's subjective worlds. A signal from the infant and the response (or lack of one) from the mother will activate a representation within each member of the dyad. The current experience may activate a representation within the mother related to how mother's signals were responded to when she was a toddler. If the mother was not responded to, she may see her child's bids for attention as a nuisance. She may then ignore the child. In the process, the toddler will be laying down a representation of the