**The relationship between maternal insightfulness into the child’s inner world and attachment in toddlers: The case of Muslim mothers from Arab society in Israel (Abstract of doctoral research proposal by Soheir Awis)**

This study focuses on the relationship between maternal insightfulness into the toddler’s inner world and the toddler’s attachment to the mother in Arab society in Israel. Secure attachment to the mother is a significant component in the emotional, social, and cognitive development of infants and children (Thompson, 2008). It is therefore important to learn about maternal capacities that can help toddlers to develop secure attachment.

Attachment theory proposes that maternal sensitivity is one of the central factors determining the quality of early relationships (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Biringen, 2000), and indeed many studies have confirmed the link between maternal sensitivity and the child’s secure attachment to her (De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997). In recent years, research has focused on the question of what helps mothers to exhibit such sensitive behavior.

Ainsworth and colleagues (Ainsworth et al., 1971; Ainsworth et al., 1978) have described sensitive mothers as capable of seeing the world from their children’s point of view, thus emphasizing the important role of insightfulness into the child’s inner world as a basis for sensitive maternal care, arguing that it serves as the mental infrastructure from which sensitive maternal behavior is derived. This idea has been supported by research on maternal insightfulness, a term that refers to mothers’ ability to speak in an open, balanced, and accepting way about the feelings, thoughts and motivations underlying their children’s behavior (Oppenheim & Koren-Karie, 2002). In the last two decades, insightfulness has been described in the literature as a central concept that values parental mentalization, and has been found to be a predictor of attachment security (Zeegers et al., 2017). Research findings suggest that children whose mothers displayed insightfulness into their inner world were more likely to develop a secure attachment toward them, in contrast to children whose mothers were found to lack such insightfulness (Koren-Karie et al., 2002; Oppenheim et al., 2001).

Maternal insightfulness has been examined in Western societies that are considered to have an individualistic orientation, but the question of whether insightfulness plays a significant role in the development of secure attachment in collectivist societies such as Arab society in Israel has not yet been examined. Parents in collectivist societies, unlike in individualistic ones, tend to emphasize adaptation to social norms more than the goals of the individual, and this may lead to parent-child interaction emphasizing appropriate behavior and adaptation to social norms rather than internal mental states of self and other (Keller, 2018), which underlie maternal insightfulness. It follows that an examination of maternal insightfulness and its relationship to attachment in this cultural niche is of particularly interest.

As far as is known, only one study has thus far been conducted on the subject of attachment in Arab society in Israel (Zreik et al., 2017). This study showed similarities in the distribution of attachment patterns at the level of two safe/unsafe patterns among Arab society in Israel, the Jewish population in Israel, and global populations. However, the expected link between sensitivity and attachment security was found only among the Christian Arab mothers (as opposed to Muslim Arab mothers). In the Christian group, mothers of infants with secure attachment received higher sensitivity scores than mothers of infants with insecure attachment, however no differences were found in the sensitivity scores between mothers of secure and insecure infants of Muslim mothers. This is despite the fact that no differences were found between the two groups in the rates of secure attachment. Most of the infants in both groups exhibited a secure attachment.

The pioneering study conducted by Zreik and colleagues (2017) filled a gap in the knowledge about the issue of attachment in Arab society in Israel: The research findings showed that there are differences between Christian and Muslim mothers. Therefore, taking this a step further, the present study will focus on the unique population of Muslim Arab mothers and examine whether maternal insightfulness—which serves as the mental infrastructure for sensitive maternal behavior as well as the basis for secure attachment of children in Jewish society in Israel and in other Western samples—is linked to the quality of attachment of the children in this sample.

The present study has two main objectives: The first is to compare the distribution of attachment patterns (both at the dichotomous level of secure/insecure attachment and at the four-pattern level) in the Muslim Arab sample with those of previous studies of Jewish Israeli children ( Sagi et al., 2002; Koren-Karie et al., 2002), the single Arab Israeli sample (Zreik, et al., 2017) the Western global distribution, and the non-Western global distribution (Van IJzendoorn et al., 1999). The second objective is to examine the relationship between maternal insightfulness and attachment, that is, whether this relationship exists in a Muslim Arab sample in the State of Israel.

**Methods**

**Participants**

The study will be conducted using quantitative methods. About 80 Muslim married mothers and their children (ages 12-18 months), 50% boys and 50% girls, will be asked to participate in the study. The sample is a convenience sample and will include toddlers in the selected age range from the triangle area in Israel, whose population is religiously homogeneous - they are all Muslims. Criteria for screening will consist of healthy toddlers born after at least 36 weeks of pregnancy, with normal birth weight and no developmental problems. Families will be recruited through the distribution of letters in child care settings such as day care centers and nurseries as well as through invitation to participate in the research to be distributed on social networks. Mothers interested in participating in the study will contact the researcher.

**Procedure**

Mothers and toddlers will be invited to a playroom in a laboratory at al-Qasemi College and will participate in the Strange Situation procedure (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Next, the Insightfulness Assessment will be conducted, in which children and their mothers will be observed in three play situations (free, structured, and social). Next, the children will play with a research investigator while at the same time the mothers will be interviewed and asked to fill out a number of questionnaires. It should be noted that the researcher is a lecturer working at the college where the research will be conducted and that the entire research team speaks Arabic as a mother tongue. Thus, Arabic will be used in interactions with the mothers and in the questionnaires.

**Tools**

**The Strange Situation Procedure (SSP)**

The Strange Situation includes seven episodes of three minutes each in which the toddler, the mother, and an unfamiliar woman participate. The toddler is exposed to stress derived from exposure to the strange woman and two brief separations from the mother. In the assessment of attachment, emphasis is placed on the episodes of reunion with the mother, based on the toddler’s reactions to her, which can be classified into one of four attachment groups: Secure attachment (B), avoidant insecure attachment (A), ambivalent insecure attachment (C), and insecure disorganized attachment (D). Coders with proven experienc**e** and reliabilitywill analyze the films (Dr. Zreik and Prof. Koren-Karie). Inter-rater reliability will be tested by having 20% of Strange Situations analyzed and doubly-classified.

**Insightfulness Assessment (Koren-Karie & Oppenheim, 1997).**

*Procedure:* This procedure consists of two parts: An interaction between mother and child, and an interview based on observing segments of the interaction. In the first part, the mothers will be filmed with the child in three different play situations: Free, structured, and social play, in order to produce the video segments about which the mother will be interviewed. In the second part, the mother will watch two minutes out of each of the aforementioned play situations, and after watching each segment the mother will be asked about her child’s thoughts and feelings as well as about her own thoughts and feelings during the observation. The mother will be asked to base her answers both on examples from the segments she has viewed and on examples from everyday life.

*Analysis*: The interview will be transcribed and coded according to 10 scales ranging from 1 (low) to 9 (high) and according to the scores in these scales. According to the criteria in the analysis guide, participants are classified into one of two insightfulness categories: Positive insight or non-insight (type: Unilateral, detached or mixed). The author of the proposal will carry out the analysis of the interviews. Inter-rater reliability will be tested against the instrument developers. 20% of interviews will be double-coded. The author will be blind to the coding of the Strange Situation for each child. Likewise, the analyzers of the Strange Situations will be blind to the coding of the Insightfulness Assessment. In order to maintain the blindness of the analyzers, code numbers will be given to all the transcripts and identifying details of the participants will be removed.

**Demographic background questionnaire** - A demographic questionnaire was created to collect basic details about the mothers such as age, years of education, marital status, level of religiosity and the like.

**Level of religiosity questionnaire**: This questionnaire is based on the level of religiosity questionnaire of Ben Meir and Kedem-Friedrich (1979). It examines religious belief and observance of directives that together define the degree of a person’s religiosity, and is in principle not associated with any particular religion. The questionnaire contains seven items that are measured on a Likert scale with seven levels from 1- (“not at all”) to 7 (“very much”). This questionnaire was found to have high internal reliability with an alpha Kronbach value of .97 (Fallah, 2001; Volkinson, 2019).

**Parental Attitude Instrument**: The instrument was developed by the Australian Ministerial Council for Early Education (Winter, 2010) and includes 16 items that assess parental attitudes regarding the developmental needs of children in the first years of life, for example: “It is important that children go to sleep more or less at the same time every day.”

**Importance of the research and recommendations for policy makers:**

From a research perspective, this is a pioneering study that examines the relationship between maternal insightfulness and early attachment in infancy in the Arab cultural context. While previous work has dealt with the mother’s behavior towards the child (sensitivity); the present study will examine the mother’s perceptions and mentalization regarding the child, which the literature indicates are of great importance to maternal behavior. Therefore, the study will contribute an additional layer of maternal mentalization through the use of the maternal insightfulness interview.

In addition, the research will be able to assist in the development and implementation of intervention methods aimed at increasing maternal insightfulness and promoting secure attachments between infants and their mothers. These interventions may be used by social workers in their work with families experiencing mother-child difficulties.

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