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Maternal attachment representations in relation to emotional availability and discipline behaviour

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Maternal attachment representations have been investigated in relation to sensitivity and emotional support, but rarely in relation to other important areas of daily parent–child interactions in early childhood, like limit setting and discipline strategies. This study investigates maternal attachment representations in relation to parenting sensitive and discipline behaviours. The sample consists of 37 Portuguese high-risk severely economically disadvantaged mothers and their 1- to 4-year-old children, that responded to the Adult Attachment Interview, and were observed in play and discipline interaction contexts. The results showed that a more preoccupied state of mind was related to less emotional availability in free play interaction with child. A more secure attachment representation was related to more psychologically controlling discipline tactics. These findings highlight the relevance of maternal attachment states of mind in understanding parenting practices in several domains, and are discussed in light of sociocultural factors.

Keywords: Attachment; Parenting; Poverty.

Attachment representation refers to the way individual's process attachment-related information, and reflects the accumulation of attachment experiences throughout development (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). Representation of

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attachment constitutes an interpretative filter that influence views and expectations of the self and others (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Several studies have shown that secure attachment representations predict more sensitive and emotionally supportive parenting behaviours (e.g. Coppola, Vaughn, Cassibba, & Costantini, 2006; Pederson, Gleason, Moran, & Bento, 1998). However, within early childhood, limit setting and discipline strategies are also important aspects of daily parent–child interactions (Edwards & Liu, 2002; Kochanska, Murray, & Harlan, 2000). Further, early insensitive parenting and maladaptive discipline practices are related and share cognitive mechanisms associated to the interpretation of child behaviours (Joosen, Mesman, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Van IJzendoorn, 2012). Yet, parental attachment representations have rarely been investigated specifically in relation to discipline practices. Moreover, individual variations in the quality of discipline practices are particularly salient in populations living in socioeconomically disadvantaged circumstances. This is one of the most vulnerable groups described by literature at the verge of stress, dysfunctional marital and parental interactions and negative child developmental outcomes (Conger & Donnellan, 2007). Parents living in poverty are more likely to engage in problematic discipline practices. It is thus especially important to learn more about the antecedents of positive versus negative discipline practices in these populations. In this study, we test the hypothesis that maternal attachment representations predict both maternal sensitivity and maternal discipline practices in a sample of economically deprived mother and young children. This type of sample addresses a salient gap in the literature, as most research is yet based upon middle class, well-educated families. Difficulties in recruiting and retaining such high-risk groups in research are well documented (e.g. Spoth, Goldberg, & Redmond, 1999) but the study of parenting in such samples is extremely important to the field. In economically deprived samples, the risk of actually harmful parenting strategies is much higher than in middle-class samples where even less optimal parenting is likely to still represent good-enough parenting. Thus, to really study meaningful individual variations in the quality of discipline practices requires a study population that includes families in which—unfortunately—harmful discipline strategies may actually occur. This is the case for socioeconomically disadvantaged families in which unemployment, daily stress and dysfunctional marital relations are known to increase the risk for problematic parenting and negative child developmental outcomes (Conger & Donnellan, 2007).

Attachment representation is often measured using the Adult Attachment Interview (George, Kaplan, & Main, 1985). Participant's answers can be classified as secure-autonomous, dismissing or preoccupied, and unresolved if, together with any of the prior patterns, individuals show disorganization when discussing experiences of loss and trauma (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). Attachment representation has been extensively investigated as part of the

intergenerational transmission model of attachment proposed by Van IJzendoorn (1995). The model describes how, throughout development, internal working models of attachment—based on a parent's own childhood experiences— influence their parenting qualities, including sensitivity, which in turn are predictive of the quality of the attachment relationship with their own children. Sensitivity is therefore an important construct that bridges parents' representations of attachment and quality of attachment with children. It is defined as the ability to being attentive to the child, to perceive her signals, to correctly interpret them and to respond promptly and appropriately (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Rooted in attachment theory, emotional availability refers to the “capacity of a dyad to share an emotional connection and to enjoy a mutually fulfilling and healthy relation” (Biringen & Easterbrooks, 2012, p. 1). The emotional availability construct includes sensitivity, but also nonintrusiveness, nonhostility and structuring. The literature documents interesting links between emotional availability and attachment: lower levels of maternal sensitivity, nonintrusiveness and nonhostility are related to insecure and disorganized attachments in children (Easterbrooks, Biesecker, & Lyons-Ruth, 2000; Swanson, Beckwith, & Howard, 2000; Ziv et al., 2000).

There is mounting evidence for the intergenerational transmission model (De Wolff & Van IJzendoorn, 1997; Van IJzendoorn, 1995 for meta-analysis; Tarabulsky et al., 2005). Studies indicate that mothers with secure attachment representations are more likely to be sensitive interactive partners to their children, to be more supportive, helpful and emotionally available when interacting with children (e.g., Aviezer, Sagi, Joels, & Ziv, 1999; Biringen et al., 2000; Cassibba, Van IJzendoorn, & Coppola, 2012; Crowell & Feldman, 1988; Pederson et al., 1998). Not many studies have examined the distinct insecure attachment state of mind classifications in relation to parenting, often because of restrictions of the sample size and attachment representation distribution. The studies that did examine this show that preoccupied mothers engage in a confuse and controlling style of instructions as well as an angry and intrusive parenting style, whereas dismissing mothers adopt a directive or controlling style and are significantly less sensitive compared to autonomous and preoccupied mothers (Adam, Gunnar, & Tanaka, 2004; Crowell & Feldman, 1988; Pederson et al., 1998). The use of a dimensional instead of a categorical approach can be helpful in this respect. Although categorical coding has been considered the golden standard in the field, the dimensional approach is being increasingly considered both because it has methodological advantages (i.e., no small subgroups) and because it can be argued that variability in states of mind can be better captured in terms of degree than categories (e.g. Whipple, Bernier, & Mageau, 2011). Recent studies indeed suggest this continuous approach as useful, uncovering differences that would go unnoticed if using a categorical approach (Whipple et al., 2011).

In contrast to the considerable number of publications linking attachment representation to parental sensitivity and emotional support, it seems that

representation of attachment has not been sufficiently studied in relation to other dimensions of parenting such as parental control or discipline practices. However, these are crucial dimensions of parenting in early childhood. It is commonly agreed that toddlerhood is a particular demanding period for parenting because of the child's growing need for autonomy and independence but still not fully developed impulse control and emotion regulation (Edwards & Liu, 2002). These developmental issues underline the importance of two seemingly competing parenting behaviours: the need to be supportive and responsive but also to exert control and limit setting to foster child's self-regulation (Edwards & Liu, 2002; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Smith, 2010). Research distinguishes between positive and coercive discipline. The first refers to a supportive and autonomy-promoting set of strategies (Nelsen, Erwin, & Duffy, 2007) and the latter to parenting behaviours aimed at obtaining child compliance through force and negative control (Patterson, 1982). Among coercive strategies, it is important to make a distinction between harsh behavioural control and psychological control. Psychological control represents an intrusive, psychological and negative style of control, which limits children's autonomy (e.g., Barber, 1996; Barber & Harmon, 2002), whereas harsh behavioural control implies the use of physical aggression or unnecessary force that creates a strong physical impact onto the child in order to get the child to comply.

Previous studies on parental sensitivity can provide some insights that are also relevant to the arena of discipline practices. Indeed, there is evidence that lower levels of maternal sensitivity at 3 months are predictive of higher levels harsh parenting in the second year of life, mediated by low maternal sensitivity at 6 months (Joosen et al., 2012). Another reason to examine the relation between parental attachment representations and discipline practices is that, unlike play tasks or routine activities, which are typically non-distressing, discipline contexts can elicit parent-child conflicts. It has been proposed that parents' representations of emotionally laden childhood experiences can influence parental interpretation and action, not only in attachment situations, but also in other stress and affect-laden situations, such as disciplinary circumstances (Hill, Fonagy, Safier, & Sargent, 2003). These are especially relevant during toddler years when a conflict may exist between the child's sense of autonomy and the parent's socialization pressures towards desirable behaviours (Edwards & Liu, 2002). In addition, these contexts are not only potentially stressful for the child who needs to comply with unwanted demands, but also for the parent who may experience frustration in the face of child oppositional behaviour (e.g., Granic & Patterson, 2006). Given that increased stress levels may intensify the differences in functioning between individuals' with secure and insecure attachment representations (Adam et al., 2004), parental discipline behaviours may also be influenced by attachment representation. However, to our knowledge, there are only two studies that

address the connection between attachment representation and discipline practices to some extent. Bus and Van IJzendoorn (1992) showed that maternal secure attachment representations were related to fewer maternal attempts to discipline their child to focus on the reading task after the child showed disinterest. Verschueren, Dossche, Marcoen, Mahieu, and Bakermans-Kranenburg (2006) demonstrated a relation between maternal insecure attachment representations and higher over-reactivity and psychological control in a discipline situation, as well as less warmth and responsiveness to the child's feelings. Thus, it appears that insecure attachment representations may lead to coercive discipline patterns.

Finally, considering that parenting is inseparable of its ecology (Belsky, 1984; Bronfenbrenner & Cornell, 1986), it is important also to consider contextual variables. Literature refers to the negative outcomes that rise from the accumulation of risk factors and also to the vulnerabilities that can generate from chronic stress exposure (e.g. Rutter, 1979; Sameroff, 2000). Both these factors relate to life under economic strains. The Family Stress Model (Conger & Donnellan, 2007) clearly describes that economic pressures associated with low family income lead to parental stress, which in turn threatens parenting quality and child development. Indeed, there is ample empirical evidence that economic disadvantage puts considerable strains on parenting (e.g. Evans, 2004; Sameroff, 2000). Stress is in fact a stable and corrosive element, related to the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the environments of low-SES families, and puts them at risk for helplessness, negative emotional states, relations and parenting practices (e.g. Evans, 2004; McLoyd, 1990). It is in poor families especially that individual differences in parenting quality are salient, because there is an increased likelihood of encountering particularly harmful parenting patterns, such as physically and psychologically harsh discipline. Understanding predictors of such patterns within an economically deprived context is crucial to furthering prevention efforts in at-risk communities. This study draws on insights from the intergenerational model of attachment and aims to contribute to the further clarification of predictors of parenting behaviours by examining maternal attachment representations in relation to maternal emotional availability and discipline behaviour in a unique sample of poor and high-risk mothers of 1- to 4-year old children. In addition, we check the role of salient family context factors: daily stress and family risk. We expect that more secure maternal attachment representation will be predictive of more emotional available parenting and less coercion (i.e. less harsh behavioural control and psychological control). Contrastingly, more dismissing and preoccupied representations are expected to be associated with less emotional available parenting and higher coercion. Following the Family Stress Model, we hypothesize that contextual factors such as family risk and stress will predict less supportive parenting behaviour and more coercive discipline strategies.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were drawn from a wider intervention study on the efficacy of the Video-Feedback Intervention to promote Positive Parenting and Sensitive Discipline in a low-income sample. Participants were recruited through contacts with health and social work agencies, for concerns about the quality of the child's caregiving environment (for details see Negrão, Pereira, Soares, & Mesman, 2014). Immediately at first contact, 32.3% eligible families refused to participate in the intervention study and another 23.3% discontinued their participation during or directly after pretest assessment. Mothers who completed all measures of interest in the pretest were considered for this study, regardless of their participation in later assessments. The sample for this study consisted of 37 mothers and their children: 56.8% were boys and the majority of the children had siblings (81.1%). The mean age of the children was 28.19 months ($SD = 10.32$; range = 12–48) and the mean ages of mothers 29.78 years ($SD = 6.04$; range = 20–46). The families were from very disadvantaged backgrounds: maternal educational level was low (64.9% did not complete Portuguese mandatory educational level, i.e., 9 school years, compared to 48.7% nationally), 67.6% for mothers were unemployed (compared to 11.9% nationally), most families received welfare assistance (75.7%, compared to 9.9% nationally) and the rate of single-parent families was relatively high at 24.3% (compared to 10.5% nationally). Participants were assessed in their own homes. First mothers filled in of a set of questionnaires, in a second session mother and child were videotaped during the completion of several tasks (1 h), and finally the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) was administered in a separate session.

Measures

Maternal interactive behavior in play. Maternal behaviour was assessed in a 10-min free play episode, with toys provided by the researchers, in which the mother was instructed to interact with her child as she would normally do. Videotapes were coded with the 4th Edition of the *Emotional Availability Scales* (EAS; Biringen, 2008). The EAS contain four parental scales describing different aspects of parental interactive behaviour: *Sensitivity*—parent's ability to be emotionally connected with the child; *Structuring*—parent's attempts to effectively structure and scaffold the child's environment and play, as well as to set appropriate limits; *Nonintrusiveness*—parent's ability to follow child's lead and to wait for optimal breaks to enter interaction; *Nonhostility*—absence of covert and overt hostility. Each scale consists of 7 subscales (score range for each scale 7–29, which then translates to a 1–7-point scale according to a standardized table). A team of raters coded the scales: average intraclass correlation (single rater, absolute agreement) for intercoder reliability for all

separate pairs of three coders on variables was .87 (range = .72–.95; $n = 7$). For the analysis, a composite reflecting the mean of the four EAS was created.

Maternal interactive behaviour in discipline. Maternal discipline was measured in a don't-touch task where mothers were asked to prevent the child from touching a set of toys for 2 min. For the next 2 min, the child was allowed to play only with the least attractive toy. Standardized procedures for coding the discipline rating scales were used to measure different aspects of discipline (adapted from Verschueren et al., 2006): *Harsh behavioral control* was a composite of a physical and verbal scale (average of these two 1–5-point scales), reflecting the extent to which mother's behaviour showed unnecessary physical force, and the degree of irritation and anger displayed in her tone of voice; *Psychological control* (scale 1–5 points) reflected the intensity and frequency of mother displays of the following behaviours: inducing child's guilt, disregarding the child's feelings, withholding affection, and inconsistent emotional behaviour; *Supportive control* was measured using the supportive presence scale devised by Erickson, Sroufe, and Egeland (1985) and reflects the emotional scaffolding provided by mother, within this discipline task, acknowledging and encouraging the child's accomplishments on the task and providing appropriate support when the child needs it (scale 1–7 points). The average intraclass correlation (single rater, absolute agreement) for intercoder reliability (for all separate pairs of four coders) was .80 (range = .70–.91; $n = 24$).

Maternal attachment representation. Participants responded to the AAI (George et al., 1985), a semi-structured interview focused on the developmental history with attachment figures, including general and specific questions regarding critical attachment experiences (problems, illnesses, separations, rejections, losses, and traumatic events) and about the relationship with their children in the present and in the future. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and then coded with the AAI Q-sort (Kobak, 1993). This method, based on Main and Goldwyn' (1984/1998) original classification system, emphasizes the relation between affect regulation and attachment patterns, by examining the use of deactivating and hyperactivating emotional strategies. In this Q-sort prototypical distributions for security versus insecurity and hyperactivation versus deactivations were previously defined. The prototypes describe hypothetical individuals that use secure (vs. insecure) and hyperactivating (vs. deactivating) strategies. Besides, prototypical distributions of dismissing and preoccupied patterns were also defined (for details see Kobak, 1993). Each interview is rated according to 100 items coded from extremely uncharacteristic (1) to extremely characteristic (9) into a forced, bell-shaped distribution, considering the resemblance/correlation to a strategy of security versus insecurity and hyperactivation versus deactivation and to each

prototypical pattern of secure, dismissing and preoccupied. This procedure was defined by the author and used in several studies (e.g. Dias, Soares, Klein, Cunha, & Roisman, 2011; Kobak, Cole, Ferenz-gillies, Fleming, & Gamble, 1993). In this study, the AAIs were Q-sorted by 11 trained judges, all of them having reliability with Kobak's sorts of the main attachment patterns and strategies. Each interview was scored by 2 independent judges, and interrater reliability was assessed using Spearman-Brown prophecy formula. A third judge was used if interrater reliability did not reach .65. Each interview score was then correlated with the prototypical scores of secure, preoccupied and dismissing attachment patterns. The average final composite sorts interrater reliability score was .76 (range, .65 to .92). These coding resulted in 11 mothers with a primary classification of secure-autonomous (30%), 13 classified as preoccupied (35%) and 13 classified as dismissing (35%). However, for this article we used the continuous approach to the construct of attachment representation.

Family psychosocial risk. Staff members of health and social work agencies filled in the Portuguese short version of the Family Risks and Strengths Profile (PRF, Pereira, Negrão, Soares, Almeida, & Machado, 2009) for each referred family. The PRF was used as a measure of cumulative risk with 62 items about family exposure to risk factors distributed in 7 risk clusters—economic conditions (e.g. family receives economic aids), housing conditions (e.g. overcrowding), mother and father risk status (e.g. drug addiction), family relations quality (e.g. marital violence), parenting quality (e.g. physical aggression as discipline strategy), pregnancy (e.g. unwanted pregnancy), child problems (e.g. social withdrawn)—and 1 protective cluster—social support system (e.g. neighbours' support).

Daily stress. Mothers filled in the Portuguese Version of the *Daily Hassles Questionnaire* (Negrão, Pereira, & Soares, 2010, based on Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981). The questionnaire includes 43 items measuring stressors related to daily life (e.g. having to clean and take care of the house) and to the exercise of parenthood (e.g. having to run extra errands for my children). All items are rated on a 5-point scale (0 = *no hassle* to 4 = *big hassle*). And the internal consistency score (Cronbach's alpha) for the total scale was .87.

RESULTS

First, we analyzed the descriptive statistics on all variables, which are reported in Table 1. One outlier was found in the discipline variables (harsh behavioural control). Recommendations by Keppel and Wickens (2004) were followed and the outlier (with a $|z| > 3.29$) was included in the dataset after winsorizing it by bringing closer to the rest of the distribution (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2001) after

TABLE 1
Descriptive statistics for maternal interactive behaviour, attachment representation,
family psychosocial risk and family daily stress

Variable	N = 37	
	Mean	SD
Maternal interactive behaviour in play		
Emotional availability	4.55	1.13
Maternal interactive behaviour in discipline		
Harsh behavioural control	2.74	1.22
Psychological control	1.66	0.93
Supportive control	3.81	1.31
Attachment representation		
Secure	-.14	0.46
Dismissing	0.17	0.36
Preoccupied	0.08	0.40
Family psychosocial risk	11.43	6.56
Family daily stress	47.28	19.35

which it was no longer an outlier. Analyses of the distributions of the other variables indicate that assumptions for normal distributions were met for parametric statistical treatment.

Second, we ran correlations between all variables, to examine the associations between contextual factors (i.e. family psychosocial risk and daily stress), maternal representations, and parenting behaviour. As reported in Table 2, increased security scores on the AAI were related to higher levels of

TABLE 2
Correlations among all variables of interest

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Attachment representation									
1. Secure	–	-.63**	-.93**	-.29	-.29	.19	-.11	.50**	.14
2. Dismissing		–	.33*	.05	.36*	.18	.22	-.29	.20
3. Preoccupied			–	.28	.20	-.36*	.00	-.47**	-.28
4. Family psychosocial risk				–	.04	-.19	.09	-.12	-.02
5. Family daily stress					–	-.16	.30	-.27	.06
Maternal interactive behaviour play									
6. Emotional availability						–	-.14	.16	.38*
Discipline									
7. Harsh behavioural control							–	.29	.00
8. Psychological control								–	.02
9. Supportive control									–

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

psychological control in the discipline settings, whereas higher preoccupied scores are related to lower psychological control in the discipline tasks, and less emotional availability in play. Increased levels of emotional availability during play were related to more supportive control behaviours in the discipline tasks. The contextual variables were not related to the quality of parenting behaviour, but an association was found between higher dismissing scores and higher levels of daily stress. We further conducted regression analyses with interaction effects to test the potential moderation role of the contextual variables—daily stress and family psychosocial risk—in the relation between maternal attachment representation and parenting behaviour. However none of these analyses yielded significant moderation effects.

DISCUSSION

This investigation extends the relevance of the attachment framework to the study of parental behaviours beyond the sphere of sensitivity and emotional support, and into discipline and controlling behaviour. Our study of parenting behaviours in a Portuguese high-risk group showed that maternal emotional availability within a play task is negatively related to a preoccupied state of mind. The connection between emotional availability and maternal representations had already been demonstrated in different cultural samples (Biringen, Derscheid, Vliegen, Closson, & Easterbrooks, 2014). This result confirms this study hypothesis and supports the premise that the confusion, entanglement, and incoherence that characterize a preoccupied state of mind (Main, 1996), inhibit mothers' ability to provide appropriate and successful guidance attuned to the needs of the child. A more preoccupied state of mind seems to convert in to a more self-centred pattern of interaction that distracts more preoccupied mothers from the recognition of the child's signals and needs, resulting in a lower quality of interaction. This is also in line with other research measuring emotional availability as a function of attachment representation in similar risk samples, where preoccupied mothers were found to show the least optimal emotional availability (Oyen, Landy, & Hilburn-Cobb, 2000). Parental attachment representations are also relevant to theoretical frameworks emphasizing discipline interactions between parents and children. For example, more recent conceptualizations of coercion theory describe the role of parental affective–cognitive mechanisms as the underlying psychological factors that give rise to behavioural patterns characterized by mutual coercion and negative reinforcement (Granic & Patterson, 2006). The finding that psychological control in a discipline setting is positively correlated with security and negatively related to preoccupied state of mind is intriguing. In line with the findings of Verschueren et al. (2006), we predicted that security would be related to lower levels of coercive discipline strategies. To explain these unexpected findings, we may consider the role of the socio-cultural context of parenting practices (Darling &

Steinberg, 1993; Güngör, 2008; Güngör & Bornstein, 2010; Kagitçibasi, 2007). With respect to psychological control, it has been noted that although it is evaluated negatively in the USA, cross-cultural studies show that it occurs quite frequently and is an acceptable mean of regulating young children's behaviour in some countries (Olsen et al., 2002). This may also be relevant to the Portuguese context. Until recently, Portuguese society endorsed an authoritarian power-based view of parenting (Wall, 2010). In the last decades society has been changing with respect to views of parenting, but there is evidence that this change has occurred much less strongly in disadvantaged families (Seabra, 2002). The same study observed low-SES families' eagerness to compel children to meet societal expectations and simultaneously not to punish them too severely, thus avoiding corporal punishment, as a reaction to their own negative childhood memories of such practices. A movement from control to seduction in relation with the child (Kellerhals & Montandon, 1991) can be happening, in which moving away from physical punishment, in combination with a strong wish to foster conformation to rules, has led to more verbal forms of control, including the more negatively laden psychological control. Indeed some statements like "be a good girl, mum loves you if you behave", or "don't do that, or mum will be very sad because of you" are very common in Portugal and were coded often in our study. These statements, although relatively mild, represent forms of psychological control because they make maternal love dependent on child behaviour and make use of guilt induction. But they also can be viewed as targeting children's socialization in limits and moral, and a method of alerting the child to the consequences of behaviour on others. It may be that, during early childhood and in a risk context, secure attachment representation relates to a parenting style that socializes children in the dominant norms.

There are several reasons to suggest that psychological control fits the cultural framework in Portugal. Psychological control has been conceptualized both as a pressure for relatedness, physical and emotional proximity, that is, *dependency-oriented psychological control*, and for meeting parental achievement demands, that is, *achievement-oriented psychological control* (Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Luyten, 2010). In Portugal, like in other southern Europe countries, interdependence and subordination to group goals are vastly valued, especially in low socioeconomic status, which would fit with psychological control being a socially accepted practice aimed at the socialization of manners and social harmony, resembling what is described for the Turkish culture (Güngör, 2008; Güngör & Bornstein, 2010). In addition dependency-oriented psychological control tends to occur more frequently when parents perceive threats to the relationship (Soenens et al., 2010), which is consistent with the discipline context used in this study in which the parent's and child's opposing wishes can be interpreted as threatening by the parents. It should be noticed that we are not assuming that the child will be immune to the potentially negative consequences of psychological control, but the specific cultural framework can eventually lend

adaptive significance to its display. This is consistent with other studies showing that within certain socio-cultural contexts, parental practices generally labelled as negative can either relate to less adverse outcomes (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997; Lansford et al., 2005) or even to positive effects (Bronstein, 1994).

In the context of this study, attachment representation showed to be noteworthy in the prediction of parenting, whereas contextual characteristics were not related to parenting. This may be due to the homogeneity of the sample, with all families experiencing a high level of risk and deprivation. Although the contextual variables do show significant variation between participants, different levels of risk within a deprivation context may not be salient enough to predict parenting.

Strengths of this study include a detailed look into the role of insecure representations in predicting parenting behaviour; the analysis of different parenting contexts; the use of observational measures. We also underscore as a major strength of this study the unique sample in terms of the level of social deprivation, which furthers our understanding of parenting in a social group less represented in research. This sample represents a highly vulnerable group, both from a societal and a psychological point of view, with low education levels, high rates of unemployment, and frequent experiences of trauma, loss and abuse as revealed in the AAI interviews. Analyzing mother–child interaction in such a high-risk group adds special value to the study, because this knowledge is needed to strengthen intervention efforts that are most needed in vulnerable socioeconomic contexts, sorely underrepresented in studies on the origins of problematic parenting practices. Apart from the assets of this study, we also acknowledge several limitations. First, the small sample size may have limited the statistical power to detect significant relations among variables, calling for further research with a larger number of dyads. Second, the Q-sort coding system for the AAI does not allow to code unresolved attachment representations whereas this category would be of particular interest given the high risk level of our sample. Third, although psychological control showed strong relations with maternal attachment states of mind, the occurrence of this aspect of parenting was low (on average between a coding of (1) *No psychological control* and (2) *Barely any psychological control: the behaviours occur only once or a few times in mild form*). Longer observation times may tap into more frequent and severe psychological control. In addition, more research into the meaning and correlates of psychological control in specific sociocultural contexts is needed to fully understand our results. Also future research should collect data on attachment in children, which would enable a more complete picture of these issues in the framework of intergenerational transmission of attachment. The high correlation of the secure and preoccupied dimensions also calls for more precise investigations into the role of preoccupied versus general insecure aspects of attachment.

In conclusion this study points to the relevance of examining maternal representations of attachment when studying parental behaviour, not only in traditional arenas such as sensitivity and emotional support but also regarding discipline strategies. This is relevant knowledge given that sensitivity, emotional availability and parental control are fundamental elements of early childhood parenting and child development. The association between emotional availability during play and supportive control behaviours in a discipline task shows that these can be seen as integral parts of general parenting competence in early childhood (Bornstein, 2002). The study also draws attention to the relevance of using a continuous approach to the AAI, especially when working with small samples, as it can reveal important differences between types of insecurity. Briefly, these findings show the importance of maternal attachment states of mind in understanding parenting practices in several domains, and point to the potential relevance of sociocultural factors in explaining the nature of these associations.

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