

Emotional Availability in Mothers and Infants in  
Relation to Maternal Factors of Employment, Self-Efficacy and Stress

by

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A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
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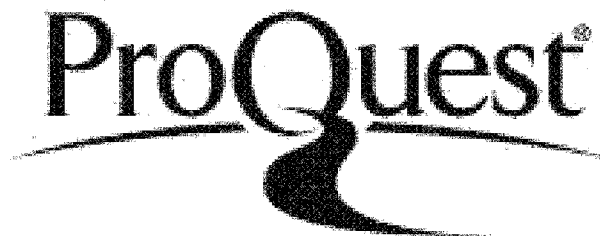


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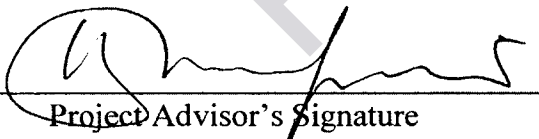
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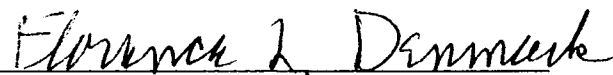
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PREVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

Research on children's social-emotional experiences in the first year of life bears relevance to whether mothers work, and if so, how maternal employment is related to children's development. Thirty mother-infant dyads from the New York City metropolitan region participated in a study focused on the correspondences maternal employment demonstrates with mother, child, and dyadic emotional availability. The study assessed the mother-infant relationship based upon video-observation employing the Emotional Availability Scale-4th Edition. Other variables included maternal perceptions of stress, efficacy, and job satisfaction. Results indicated maternal employment and maternal self-perceptions were not related to emotional availability. No significant group differences were found given maternal employment status across emotional availability, stress, or self-efficacy. Effect-sizes were reported between small and medium strength, suggesting that with a larger sample, some findings might increase in significance. Results of the study contribute to attachment and social learning theories. Future research and limitations are discussed.

*Keywords:* attachment, emotional availability, Job Satisfaction, maternal employment, mother-infant dyad, self-efficacy, stress

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Women, work, and parenting have recently been in the public eye with two of the currently leading websites, *Yahoo* and Facebook, having outspoken women executives at the top. Marissa Mayer, CEO of *Yahoo!*, took two weeks maternity leave before returning to her post (Lewis, 2012). Soon after, she banned all employees from ever working from home. Although her explanation of this controversial policy was her belief that employees are more innovative and collaborative when they work together, such a policy puts parents—mothers and fathers—in an impossible position when some days working at home might be the only way parents can afford to raise young children. This policy was announced after Mayer built a nursery adjoining her office at work to satisfy her own conflict between career and motherhood (Kleinman, 2013; Rockman, 2013). CFO of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg, authored *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013). The title implies that women have started to “lean back” regarding leadership in organizations and policy making. Sandberg states one of the reasons for this is women want to have children, a factor making the responsibilities of being a major corporate CEO extremely challenging.

Regardless of the initial equality between a couple prior to having a child, the major responsibility of raising a child almost always rests on the mother (Peters, 1997). In 1996, less than 20% of fathers were the primary caregiver for children between the ages of 0-5 years-old (Halle, 2002). Moreover, when a child’s life strays from perfection,

which it inevitably will, the mother is often the one blamed (Jackson & Mannix, 2004). One of the easiest places to find fault is if the mother worked while raising the child. A child's attachment security, cognitive, social, and emotional skills are often under the microscope when assessing how maternal employment could detrimentally effect their development. Although employment decreases the amount of time mothers can spend with their infants, research has shown that mothers compensate by spending more time with their infants when not at work than in other activities. Maternal employment during children's first year of life has been found to have no significant relationship with children's cognitive, social and emotional development, attachment security, or engagement with mothers. In fact, indirect positive effects in the home environment and maternal sensitivity have been associated with mothers employed full-time during the first year (Bianchi, 2000; Huston & Rosenkrantz Aronson, 2005). Research has further revealed that the mother's attitude about work and returning to work is a major indicator of a child's attachment security (Harrison & Ungerer, 2002).

In the United States, the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA; U.S. Department of Labor, 2009) protects mothers' job security for 12 weeks maternity leave, however, depending on company and state-wide decisions, there is no mandated pay during this time. Almost all other countries in the world provide a percentage of paid maternity leave with at least 12 weeks, often more (Berger & Waldfogel, 2004; Huffington Post Canada, December & May 2012). With that said, how is it that many countries with similar or slightly more time for maternity leave than the United States have had women as leaders, presidents and prime ministers for decades (Wilson Center, 2012)? Mayer and Sandberg are directly and indirectly expressing to the American

women in corporate America that the difficulty of blending motherhood and a career will not change until women fight for high-end jobs and society begins to address this issue.

“According to the 2008 report by the Families and Work Institute...74% of American employees say they believe that women who work outside the home can be as good at mothering as those who don’t” (Miller, 2013). Some critics express that in 2013, any organization that shows preferential treatment toward men, and does not provide equal opportunity for women to lead, will result in an organization that is deficient, that will have difficulty competing (Meet the Press transcript, 2013). In the March 2013 Time Magazine article “Don’t Hate Her Because She’s Successful” (Luscombe, 2013), the article discussed that elevating the issue to society is the first step in addressing the greater concern. Although, this concern has recently both reflected and sparked public interest, debates about women in the workplace and how it impacts children psychologically, issues about childcare, and societal funding have been scrutinized and deliberated for more than half a century.

Maternal employment during a child’s first year of life and the impact it has on a child’s development, as well as the relationship between the mother and child in the long term, is a major and important question for developmental psychologists, working mothers, attachment theorists, economists, and policy makers. Psychologists currently lack sufficient and consistent research findings to inform psychological consultations or therapy wherein issues about parenting and career may interface (Barglow, Vaughn, & Molitor, 1987; Brooks-Gunn, Han, & Waldfogel, 2010; Harrison & Ungerer, 2002; Hoffman, 1989; Owen et al., 1984). This study attempts to help improve the understanding of how maternal employment is associated with the mother-child

relationship. Women, psychologists, and society will benefit from the research leading to a better understanding of the implications of working mothers and how this role relates to children and, ultimately, society as a whole.

The emotional availability that a mother displays toward her infant has significant implications for the child's future relationships and attachments (Biringen, 2009). An early emotional connection is effectuated between parent and child through touch, tone of a voice, and a healthy quality to the interaction. Attachment theorists and other mental health professionals, building on research underscoring the importance of social-emotional experiences in the first few years of life repeatedly cite impressions that raise questions about a woman's ability to both work and offer beneficial-enough maternal care (Belsky, 1988; Bowlby, 1940; Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000). Working mothers are often criticized for leaving their infants with other caretakers, thereby risking the future of the children's relationships. Despite often being a major factor when deciding to have children, only a modicum of the attachment literature and emotional availability research has focused on the impact of maternal employment upon the emotional connection between mother and infant.

With shifts in family structure and financial responsibilities, mothers throughout the United States are spending less time at home with their children than in decades prior (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). Research about how maternal employment could be associated with mother-infant attachment will aid in decisions made and opinions held by legislature, mothers, families, and society. The working mother creates a different type of separation than is usually reflected in the attachment literature (Bianchi, 2000; Howard, Martin, Berlin, & Brooks-Gunn, 2011). It is one that is met with a reunion and

also incorporates many other factors including another attachment figure, daycare, nannies, and peer socialization. Nevertheless, understanding if, and how, the mother-child interaction is affected by this daily separation early in the child's life is highly important (Kuhn & Schanberg, 1998).

Research has repeatedly found that one's early attachments to parents have significant consequences for socio-emotional, psychological, cognitive, and behavioral well-being long term (Ainsworth, Blehear, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Biringen, 2009; Bowlby, 1940, 1969, 1973; Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1987; Parke & Buriel, 2006; Perry & Szalavitz, 2007; Sroufe & Waters, 1977; Thompson, 2000). In general, attachment has been found to correspond with an individual's ability to be in touch with his/her emotions, relate to and be open with others. Securely attached individuals have been found to exhibit a mutual regard for other persons in relationship, increasingly the likelihood of a relationship's success (Biringen, 2009; Bowlby, 1940; Perry & Szalavitz, 2007). A parent-child relationship high on emotional availability has been related to the child being less aggressive, having more positive peer relationships, being more attentive in school, and having better relationships with their teachers (Biringen et al., 2005). Moreover, as adults, individuals who are emotionally available have also been seen to have positive relationships with employees and colleagues in the workforce (Biringen, 2009).

The relationship between maternal employment and early child development has been studied in the areas of cognitive development, adjustment, and behavioral problems (Baum II, 2003; Berger, Hill, & Waldfogel, 2005; Brooks-Gunn, Han, & Waldfogel, 2010; Ruhm, 2004;). Previous research has found negative and positive effects in these

areas. Some findings indicate positive benefits to maternal employment. Early maternal employment, as well as more recent maternal employment, were found to be positive predictors of second grade academic achievement in math and reading, cognitive stimulation, and emotional support (Moore & Driscoll, 1997; Vandell, D. L., Ramanan, 1992).

It has been noted, however, that a mother's return to work in the first year of life, and especially after three months, has "detrimental effects" on the child's cognitive development (Baum II, 2003). Full-time maternal employment during the child's first year of life has been found to be associated with lower cognitive abilities in some areas as well as socio-emotional development and adjustment in four to six years later and an increased likelihood for externalizing behavior problems (Baum II, 2003; Belsky & Eggebeen, 1991; Berger, Hill, & Waldfogel, 2005; Brooks-Gunn, Han, & Waldfogel, 2010). Maternal employment during the child's teenage years has also been observed to be positively correlated to overweight risk and obesity in adolescents (Ruhm, 2004).

Research reveals inconsistent findings with regard to the relationship maternal employment has on a child's attachment security, the relationship between maternal work status and a mother's attachment toward her child, and the interaction between the two individuals. Several studies focused on maternal employment and infant attachment utilized the Strange Situation Paradigm to assess attachment security with inconclusive and conflicting results (Barglow, Vaughn, & Molitor, 1987; Brooks-Gunn, Han, & Waldfogel, 2010; Harrison & Ungerer, 2002; Hoffman, 1989). Some research has indicated that consistency is key, whereby if maternal employment status remains stable, so will the child's attachment (Owen et al., 1984). Children's attachment and maternal

sensitivity have also been related to the mother's level of anxiety, planning, or expectation to return to work (Benn, 1996; Harrison & Ungerer, 2002). Maternal employment in the child's first year of life has been found to be positively associated with maternal sensitivity toward a child years later (Brooks-Gunn, Han, & Waldfogel, 2010).

The element of an observational, as opposed to a subjective, assessment of attachment appears advantageous. However, employing the Strange Situation as an observational measure focused on the child's reaction to separating and reuniting with mother within a relatively short sequence of transitions within relatively unfamiliar surroundings, it is important to be cautious of Hoffman's (1989) consideration that, perhaps, the Strange Situation may not be a valid measure for children of working mothers because they have become accustomed to separations from their mother as well as being cared for by others (Vaughn, Deane, & Waters, 1985).

When focusing on how maternal employment is associated with the attachment relationship, an alternative observational measure, such as the Emotional Availability (EA) Scale, assessing attachment may be particularly beneficial. In addition, there is a gap in the Emotional Availability literature: maternal work status has not been assessed alongside the EA. Therefore, analyzing how emotional availability relates to maternal work status will significantly add to the attachment, maternal employment, and EA literatures. Moreover, although recent studies have indicated that maternal employment is not related to the child's attachment to the mother (Brooks-Gunn, Han, & Waldfogel, 2010), the current study also evaluates the mother's attachment to the child and the dyadic relationship between mother and infant. has Authors invested in prior research



have emphasized the importance for future research to determine if employment status relates to maternal sensitivity, an area that still remains unclear and one that this study can help shed some light upon (Brooks-Gunn, Han, & Waldfogel, 2010). Within the Emotional Availability Scale, the sensitivity dimension is highly weighted when maternal emotional availability and the mother-child emotional availability are assessed, thereby providing a more complex understanding of maternal employment, attachment, and sensitivity.

To better understand the complexity of emotional availability, explorations of potentially interfacing factors such as employment-status and of internal perceptions (such as self-efficacy and stress) appear fundamental alongside direct observations of interactions between mothers with their infants. Furthermore, stress and self-efficacy are both substantial self-perceptions that not only contribute to the mother's experience of raising children, but being employed as well. Employing an objective measure to assess emotional availability in conjunction with maternal work status, maternal self-efficacy, and maternal stress will contribute to an improved understanding of the complex processes involved in the mother-child attachment process, especially as a function of the multiple roles women fulfill and the realities and stressors they endure.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Emotional Availability Rooted in Attachment Theory**

Early relationships and emotional connections have been determined to be of critical importance for the development of healthy relationships in the future, a positive sense of self, and an ability to trust (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Biringen, 2009; Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1987; Lieberman, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 1999; Parke & Buriel, 2006; Sroufe & Waters, 1977; Thompson, 2000). According to attachment theorists, individuals' attachments to others throughout their lives originate from the early attachment style formed between caregiver and infant. From an evolutionary perspective, attachment processes, including care and protection, promote survival (Bowlby, 1988). Extremely young infants are capable of distinguishing their mothers from all other individuals. An infant learns to use signals to solicit attention from and keep mother within close proximity (e.g. clinging, crying). Typical infants will explore, learn, and develop from their environment, but are only brave enough to do so if they have a secure base in which to return (Bowlby, 1988).

Bowlby, a pioneer of attachment theory, believed that this early connection is a model for the infant to follow for future relationships and the type of bond formed between the parent and child possesses many clues in the formation of what each individual becomes. "On this foundation, it seems, the rest of his emotional life is built—without this foundation there is risk for his future happiness and health" (Bowlby, 1966).

Moreover, he emphasized the importance of the attachment bond during the time of infancy unequivocally indicating that nothing could make up for the love and affection that the child receives when young (Bowlby, 1951). Early environmental experiences like an extended separation from the mother have been known to impact the child's emotional development in creating more unfeeling, deceptive, manipulative, cunning individuals (Bowlby, 1940; Perry & Szalavitz, 2007). Bowlby also noted a second environmental factor he found to be vital in early childhood: a mother's emotional attitude toward her child.

In an attempt to find empirical evidence for Bowlby's theories on attachment, Ainsworth (expanded by Main and Solomon) began to examine the different types of attachment patterns in infancy among varying mother-child dyads. Through her research and the creation of the Strange Situation paradigm, attachment styles were determined (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Main & Solomon, 1986). These patterns of attachment have been specified as: secure, insecure/Avoidant, insecure/Ambivalent, and disorganized/disoriented. A secure attachment relates to a consistent and responsive caregiver, who in turn fosters a healthy emotional connection, and a child that is expected to have the capacity for rewarding relationships with others. An insecurely attached child has been often associated with an anxious older individual. Anxious individuals also have characteristics of lower self-esteem, more difficulty forming satisfying relationships, and overall more negative interactions with others compared to securely attached individuals. Ainsworth illuminated the key factors she found to be essential to create the secure attachment between the mother and child and, therefore the child's