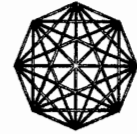


A Structural and Microanalytic Exploration of Parent-Child Relational Psychopathology



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Abstract

A videotape of a parent and child playing is used to illustrate the relational expression of psychopathology and how internal representations of a parent may be transferred to a child. The dyad's verbalizations and behaviors are understood as expressions of an underlying organization of tacitly held assumptions of self and other experiences. The case presented is of a 25-year-old mother with dependent personality characteristics and her dysfunctional interactions with her 7-year-old daughter. Descriptive data were drawn from a battery of objective tests and the structural analysis was performed on the videotaped interactions of the dyad completing the Parent-Child Interaction Assessment (PCIA, Holigrocki, Kaminski, & Frieswyk, 1999; Holigrocki, Kaminski, & Frieswyk, 2002).

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The verbal and behavioral interactions between a parent and child are key to establishing the patterns and templates that structure or tacitly organize a child's attitudes and beliefs. It is through everyday behaviors and dialogue with caregivers, extended family, and peers that the child is given choices, responded to, directed toward what to attend to, and ultimately develops internal representations that facilitate an understanding of self and others.

Internal representations are the products of how a person has come to know the self, the other, and relationships, and as informational templates they serve to organize such experiences. The world as known is experienced as being similar to or different from such structures. Representations are akin to prototypes that tacitly order one's sense of self (i.e., identity) and other (i.e., interpersonal experiences). According to Bowlby (1969/1982), internal representations (i.e., internal working models) allow people to evaluate the consequences of alternative choices of action and to choose actions that maximize adaptation.

Of all relationships, the relationship between the child and the primary caregiver contributes most to the creation of such models. Together, parent and child build a shared understanding of who they are and the nature of the world around them. The co-constructed reality of parent and child is a negotiated creation, and to some extent, parent and child each shape one another's view of self and other. Yet negotiation does not mean equality. The parent's worldview has greater influence because his or her patterns of self, other, and relationship have been established over many years of relationships, while the child's identity is less stable, for both developmental reasons and due to having had a narrower range of experiences. In other words, in the interplay of parent and child, the experienced reality of the parent often defines and constrains the reality of the child.

Further, the co-construction of reality is embedded within the holding and learning environment created by the parent that facilitates (or hampers, depending on the quality) the child's relatedness (e.g., trust and cooperation) and self-definition (e.g., autonomy, initiative, and industry) (c.f., Blatt, 2000). Specifically, the parent's successful efforts at attuning to the developmental needs and limitations of the child form a protective matrix that facilitates the emergence of positive self and other experiences in the child. Parental misattunement due to malevolent views of the

self and/or other can lead to the child developing dysfunctional and maladaptive working models.

A parent and child's self and other representations are not observable. Rather, they are the structures that organize what the participants say and do and must be inferred from observations of behaviors and verbalizations. Such inferences are hypotheses; and in the generation of similar hypotheses across a field of observations, the observer may note a thematic coherence that cuts across seemingly dissimilar interactions. The themes then provide a way of understanding additional behaviors and verbalizations. This method of dialectical inquiry is similar to the "hermeneutic circle" described by Stolorow and Atwood (1984) whereby studying parts of a dialogue can lead to an understanding of the whole; and recursively the whole provides a context for understanding the parts. Although Stolorow and Atwood were writing about communication in psychoanalysis, their method is applicable to any dialogue. In their words, "the structures of meaning disclosed by this mode of investigation become manifest in invariant thematic configurations that are repeated in different sectors of the person's experiences" (p. 91). "The aim of a structural analysis is to reduce the initial apparent disarray in a system of observed facts by illuminating the invariant structural configurations organizing that system" (p. 97).

What follows is the use of both objective tests and behavioral observations to develop an understanding of a dyad's self and other representations. Objective results are presented first, primarily for descriptive purposes. The transcriptions provide the primary material from which organizing structures are inferred.

Ms. M. and Valerie
Objective Test Results

Valerie and her mother, Ms. M., participated in a research study after having been referred by child protective services. The agency had identified this mother-child dyad as having a parent-child relational problem. Neither parent nor child had ever received a psychiatric diagnosis or been in therapy.

Valerie is a 7-year-old girl in the 2nd grade. She is the oldest child in her family and has three siblings. Valerie is biracial, with a Caucasian mother with whom she lives, and an African-American father who has visitation rights. Valerie's Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL, Achenbach, 1991), as completed by her mother, indi-

cated no behavior problems or troubling symptoms. Valerie is reported to do well in school and excels in reading.

Ms. M. is a 25-year-old single woman, who stays at home with four children. She has a 12th grade education and reports her income as less than \$10,000 per year. Personality testing completed on the mother revealed elevations on the Dependent Personality Disorder subscale of the Millon Multiaxial Clinical Inventory-III (Millon, 1994). Specifically, her base rate was 95. No other MCMI-III scales were elevated. Her score on the Beck Depression Inventory-2 (Beck, 1996) was elevated, reporting moderate symptoms of depression, especially anhedonia and impaired concentration. Ms. M. reported no history of abuse or neglect in her family of origin on the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein & Fink, 1998).

On parenting inventories, Ms. M. scored above the cut-off on the Abuse scale of the Child Abuse Potential Inventory (Milner, 1986), indicating that her parenting attitudes and behaviors are similar to that of known physical child abusers. On the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory-2 (Bavolek, 1996), Ms. M. evidenced inappropriate expectations for children and endorsed a strong belief in the value of corporal punishment. Ms. M. also reported significant parenting stress on the Parenting Stress Index (Abidin, 1995), with a total stress score in the 80th percentile.

One would expect that an adult whose scores are elevated on the dependency subscale of the MCMI-III would show evidence of the profile that Millon summarizes as "nurture and protect me" (Millon & Davis, 2000, p. 204). According to Millon and Davis, such people may be outwardly warm and affectionate but may view themselves as helpless and fear doing things on their own. They are known to put their lives in the control of others; and by suffocating others with their clinginess, they may leave themselves vulnerable to abandonment.

From Millon's description of dependency one would expect that Ms. M.'s internal representation of self is of someone who is helpless, while her representation of others are of potential rescuers and abandoners. Regarding Ms. M.'s relationship with her daughter, signs of role reversal might be expected. That is, that Ms. M. would look to Valerie for caretaking and protection. Concerns about abandonment would be prominent and the child's initiatives toward autonomy would be discouraged.

Structural Analysis

The parent and child were observed as they completed the Parent-Child Interaction Assessment (PCIA, Holigrocki, Kaminski, & Frieswyk, 2002). Using a set of toy animals, figures, and blocks, the parent and child provided answers in response to 15 story stems that are based on situations that could occur during a zoo trip. For example, during the "Gift Shop" scenario, they are given the stem, "The child wants to buy a toy in the gift shop. Mom does not want to spend money on the toy. Play out what happens together." After 90 seconds of play, the interaction is brought to a close; and the examiner proceeds to the next scenario. Following the co-construction tasks, the dyad completed the *PCIA Inquiry* where each participant was individually shown two 45 second excerpts from the videotape. After viewing the excerpts, the VCR was paused; while looking at the image, the parent and child were asked what was happening, and what they and the other were doing, thinking, feeling, and wanting. In total, thirty minutes of interaction were filmed along with 20 minutes of their reflections about the videotape.

In the following paragraphs, three PCIA scenarios (i.e., Tunnel, Lunch, and High Rock) and the Parent Inquiry are described. In each segment, material is summarized where possible, but verbatim transcriptions are included when summaries would obscure the relevant details. After each transcription, a brief commentary is provided in italics that explains inferences made about the self and other representations of parent and child.

Tunnel: The "Tunnel Scenario" begins with the examiner placing the parent and child toy figures beside an arch made of plastic blocks. The examiner gives the story stem, "This is the entrance to a scary tunnel. You are both entering the tunnel. Play out what happens together." Ms. M. and Valerie start off by pushing their figures through the tunnel. Ms. M. says there are scary monsters in the tunnel; and she asks her daughter to "get" them. The daughter complies, trying to help her mother. Next, the daughter flees to the top of the tunnel to avoid the monsters. The following exchange occurs:

Parent:	But you're not supposed to climb up there, Valerie.
Child:	But, I'm scared.

Parent: Okay, that'll work. So you'll leave me down here to get killed?
 Child: No.
 Parent: Well, I'm going to jump up here with you and knock you back down. (The parent takes her figure to the top of the tunnel and pushes the child's figure off the tunnel.)

In this scenario the daughter initially tries to protect her mother, and then tries to protect herself by climbing to the top of the tunnel. Her self-representation is of being responsible for the welfare of herself and others (e.g., daughter attempts to ward off the monsters and later avoids them) and she sees others as threatening and helpless (e.g., the monsters are potentially harmful and her mother is unable to protect her).

Possibly in an effort to frighten her daughter away from autonomy, Ms. M. chooses to pretend that the tunnel is inhabited with scary monsters. The mother seems to look to her daughter to protect her from the monsters. She sees herself as helpless and threatened (e.g., she must rely on her daughter to rescue her from harm) and sees others as ineffective rescuers who will abandon her.

Lunch. In this scenario, the examiner places the parent and child figures on either side of a plastic block, and says, "This is a table. Mom and Valerie are eating their lunch at the zoo. Play out what happens together." The mother and daughter begin by discussing what to eat and pretend to have a meal. Midway through the meal, the daughter says that she is going to walk around the zoo. The mother says that the daughter is "rebellious" and the following interaction occurs:

Parent: Valerie, come over here. We are supposed to be picnicking together.
 Child: All done. All done, Mom. (Child moves her figure to be near mother's figure)
 Parent: So you went around the zoo and fed all the animals your lunch?
 Child: Yah. (Laughing)
 Parent: And you made me sit here and eat all by myself?
 Child: Yah.

Parent: That was not very nice. I felt very lonely.
 Child: (Laughing and covering her face)
 Parent: You made me very sad.
 Child: (Laughing and sinking low in her chair.)
 Parent: Does that make you feel very sad?
 Child: No. (Laughing)
 Parent: Does that make you happy that I felt sad? Does that make you happy?
 Child: Okay, Mom, I'll be right back. (Child takes her figure and moves it around the zoo.)

Valerie is laughing through the latter half of this scenario. Her laughter functions as a manic defense, drowning out her mother's comments and helping her to cope with her anxiety and confusion. Valerie is criticized for leaving her mother during her mid-way zoo exploration, which is similar to how she was criticized for a bid for autonomy in the "Tunnel" scenario. Valerie's self and other-representations are difficult to discern due to her high anxiety and limited verbalizations during this scenario.

As for Ms. M., her self-representation is of being unlikable and rejected (e.g., she is hurt because her daughter doesn't want to remain with her). She sees the other as taking pleasure in causing her discomfort (e.g., Ms. M. makes the inference that Valerie's laughter is a sign of Valerie's joy at making Ms. M. feel sad).

High Rock. This scenario begins with the examiner using the blocks from the tunnel to form a wall. The examiner places the child figure on top of the wall and the parent figure is placed in front of the wall but facing away from the child. The instruction given is, "When Mom's back was turned, Valerie climbed on top of a high rock. Play out what happens together." Ms. M. tells her daughter to get down from the rock, and initially Valerie refuses. Next, Valerie pushes her own figure from the rock so it falls to the ground. The mother responds by asking somebody to call 911, while the daughter rights herself and runs to the opposite side of the zoo. The child actively avoids the mother, then the two of them engage in the following dialogue:

Child: Hi, sister.
 Parent: I am your mother.
 Child: Hi, sister.

Parent: Now stop misbehaving.
 Child: Hi, sister.
 Parent: You need to come here because I'm fixing to spank you. (Mother tries to grab child's figure from daughter and the daughter resists.)
 Child: Hi, sister.
 Parent: Come here. (Again, she tries to grab the daughter's figure.) Come here. Okay, you are making me mad. I'm just going to jump on this rock myself. (Mother climbs onto the rock.)
 Child: And fall down.
 Parent: Yup
 Child: (Child pushes mother's figure off the rock)
 Parent: Thanks.
 Child: What happened to the door to get in, Mamma? (Child is referring to the "High Rock" block structure, which was a tunnel in a prior scenario).
 Parent: Okay, I'm hurt and nobody's helping me and now it's up to you. (Mother's figure is lying on ground.)
 Child: What happened to the door to get in?
 Parent: It's a rock.
 Child: Oh, yes we took it.
 Parent: I'm hurt and you are not even helping me, and I'm your mother. (Parent's figure is still laying on the ground. The child moves next to her.)
 Child: Hi, sister.
 Parent: Mother.
 Child: Hi, sister.
 Parent: Do you not even love me anymore?
 Child: Ta-daaaa! (Child takes figure and stands on top of tree.)
 Parent: Valerie.
 Child: What? (Child takes figure and puts it on a giraffe.)
 Parent: Do you not even love me anymore?
 Child Singing: I'm riding on a pony (Child is sitting on a giraffe and moving her figure and the giraffe around the zoo.)
 Parent: Because you're not helping me.

Child Singing: I'm riding on a pony, riding on a pone, pone, pone.
 Parent: You are making this very difficult.
 Child Singing: I'm riding on a pony, yah, yah. I'm riding on a pony. (Child holding both giraffes, with her figure on one giraffe as if riding it.)
 Parent: Valerie.
 Child Singing: Yah, yah.

An increasingly avoidant and oppositional pattern is evident in the daughter's behaviors. The singing, similar to the laughing described in the prior scenario, serves to shut out much of what Ms. M. is saying. The daughter's representations of self seem to be as effective and capable (e.g., she pushes her mother from the rock, climbs the tree, and rides the giraffe), while her sense of other is of helpless, childlike (e.g., calling mother her sister) and not of her concern (e.g., ignoring and avoiding mother).

Ms. M. views herself as a helpless, abandoned, victim who is unlovable and desperate for attention (e.g., requiring affirmation from her daughter). The other is represented as being uncaring and disobedient.

Parent Inquiry of High Rock. As per the administration instructions, Ms. M. was shown the first 45" of the High Rock scenario and the videotape was paused. The tape was paused immediately after she said the line "Okay, you are making me mad. I'm just going to jump up on this rock myself." While watching the paused tape, the parent was interviewed with a standard set of questions:

Examiner: What was happening during that one?
 Parent: She was doing the same thing, not behaving (laughs). Not listening to what I was telling her to do.
 Examiner: Okay, and what were you doing right then?
 Parent: Trying to get her to listen to me; and when she wouldn't listen to me, I decided to just do what she did.
 Examiner: Okay, what were you thinking right then?
 Parent: Of leaving her at the zoo because she was making me mad (laughs).
 Examiner: What were you feeling right then?

- Parent: Anger, again.
 Examiner: And what did you want from Valerie right then?
 Parent: Her to listen to me and quit running off. It was really making me mad (laughs).
 Examiner: Now look at Valerie, what was she doing right then?
 Parent: What was she doing right then? Just ignoring me (laughs).
 Examiner: What was Valerie thinking right then?
 Parent: That she was wanting me to come chase after her, again; and it made her happy.
 Examiner: What was Valerie feeling right then?
 Parent: Happy (laughs).
 Examiner: What did Valerie want from you right then?
 Parent: She wanted me to go chase after her and I think she was satisfied that I gave up again.

The parent views herself as ignored and a victim of another's misbehavior. She tries to cope through fantasies of identifying with the aggressor and projective identification (e.g., fantasies of upsetting Valerie by leaving her at zoo because the child left her). She sees people as intentionally and happily causing her to experience anger (e.g., daughter as making her mad and as gaining satisfaction from her giving up the chase).

From the behavioral observations, objective tests, and interview with the mother, a picture is drawn of a daughter who is oppositional with her mother but is not reported to show signs of oppositionality in other contexts (e.g., school). Valerie sometimes sees herself as capable, as seen in her frequent efforts of initiative-taking involving climbing a tree, riding a giraffe, exploring the zoo, and trying to remove herself from stressful situations. At times, she may behave protectively such as when she tries to save mother and herself from the monsters. As well, her view of others as helpless and threatening can lead her to detach herself from them, either physically or by employing manic defenses. Ms. M.'s elevation on the MCMI-III dependency scale and behaviors with her daughter suggest that she sees herself as being an unlikable, abandoned victim who is helpless and apt to be rejected. She looks to the other for protection but sees them as being ineffective rescuers who will leave her and may even take pleasure in her anger and discomfort. Parenting problems are evidenced in the elevations on the CAP, AAPI-2, and PSI

as well as the observed interactions that are punitive, manipulative, and demonstrative of role reversals.

Conclusions

In the above excerpts of parent-child interaction the mother and child play together in a manner that was largely influenced by the mother's internal working model of self and others. Her view of herself as helpless and her concerns with abandonment and being loved become the principle themes in their activities. The mother recognizes and comments on the child's behaviors to the extent to which they conform or deviate from her need to be cared for. This is evident in the mother's discouragement of the daughter's initiative taking through her labeling of the daughter's autonomous efforts as misbehavior, signs of lack of love, and attempts to harm her.

Initially, Valerie made efforts to take initiative, explore, protect herself from harm, and be compliant. Yet her efforts of doing so were criticized and often framed by Ms. M. as signs of misbehavior. Over the course of a few minutes, Valerie can be seen becoming increasingly oppositional; and she may be enacting her mother's expectation that people will abandon and harm her. Ms. M.'s representation of the other as an abandoner could be pushing the child into a stance of avoidance. Valerie is developing an internal representation of the other as helpless and herself as unavailable. This is similar to the concept of role responsiveness (e.g., Sandler, 1976), whereby a psychoanalyst is produced to behave in accordance with the unconscious and preconscious wishes of an analysand, although in this case it is the child's behaviors being shaped by the parent's unconscious and preconscious wishes.

What might be the eventual outcome of such parent-child interactions? The extensive literature on developmental pathways sheds some light on this question. There are many paths toward acquiring any disorder, just as a set of historical circumstances can have many final outcomes (c.f., Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1996). Although the outcome is not determined, some pathways may be more probable based upon the quality of interactions observed in the videotape excerpts.

Here are a few possible outcomes: As Valerie approaches adulthood, she may display a fear of initiative taking as she identifies with her mother's concerns. That is, she may develop de-

pendent characteristics whereby she views herself as helpless and the other as abandoning. As Gabbard (2000) suggests, a child's experiences of parental reinforcement for dependency and parental rejection for movements toward independence throughout all phases of development can lay down the foundations for dependent personality disorder. Or perhaps Valerie may adopt a counter-dependent stance, becoming steadfastly oppositional or needing to distance herself from others. She may fear that compliance and agreement may lead to a curtailing of her own experiences. She would see herself as a rebel and others as constraining. It is also possible that Valerie could develop some strengths of character, such as independence and resourcefulness, in which the initial conditions are partly her experiences of having to depend primarily on herself.

Although observed interactions show variability and innovation, there is an apparent coherence throughout the interaction. The dyad's behaviors and verbalizations are understandable in terms of the coherent underlying themes of self and other experience. Tacit conceptions of self and other serve as invariant structural configurations that coherently organize the dyad and underlay the videotaped observations. Underlying themes are inferred from the observed expressions, the thematic whole and observed parts each providing a context for one another.

In the illustrated case, activities of the child that undermine tacitly held beliefs of the parent are ignored or actively refuted, while the parent is apt to attend to those activities that are coherent with self and other views. The child's initiatives are shaped by the parent's responses; and through the dyadic play, beliefs about self, others, and the world are transmitted.

It is suggested that the dyad's ongoing involvement in dialogue and shared activities provides the interpersonal pathway that can lead to a child's dysfunctional self and other representations, and possibly to psychopathology. The structural microanalysis of dyadic observations can elucidate the underlying coherent representations of self and other that organize each participant's behaviors and verbalizations. The method has value as a conceptual heuristic for the assessment of relational psychopathology, and the data gathered can assist in understanding the early genesis of later maladaptation and dysfunction.

Endnote

This paper is based on the presentation by Kaminski, P. L. & Holigrocki, R. J. *Using the Parent-Child Interaction Assessment to Explore Possible Mechanisms for the Intergenerational Transmission of Psychopathology* conducted at the Midwinter Meeting of the Society for Personality Assessment, San Antonio, TX, March 20-24, 2002.

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