Published in final edited form as:

Parent Sci Pract. 2009 January ; 9(1): 56–77. doi:10.1080/15295190802656760.

Sharing the Love: Prebirth Adult Attachment Status and Coparenting Adjustment During Early Infancy

Jean A. Talbot,

65 Berkeley St., Portland, ME 04103. E-mail: jtalbotphd@gmail.com.

Jason K. Baker, and

University of Miami.

James P. McHale

University of South Florida St. Petersburg.

SYNOPSIS

Objective—The purpose of this study to consider whether attachment security in mothers and fathers promotes more successful early coparenting adjustment, to assess the role of marital quality in amplifying or diminishing any such effects, and to examine interactive effects of maternal and paternal attachment status on coparenting.

Design—Eighty-five couples transitioning to new parenthood completed Main and Goldwyn's Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) and a multimethod marital evaluation during the pregnancy's third trimester and participated in comprehensive assessments of coparenting conflict and cohesion at 3 months postpartum.

Results—Maternal Insecure attachment status predicted higher levels of coparental conflict, as did father Secure status. Families with Insecure fathers exhibited lower coparental cohesion on the whole. Maternal attachment status moderated the relation between paternal attachment status and cohesion, with Insecure father/Secure mother dyads exhibiting the lowest levels of cohesion, and Secure/Secure dyads showing the highest levels. Prenatal marital quality predicted 3-month coparenting cohesion, but not conflict. Prenatal marital quality did not interact with parental attachment status in the prediction of coparenting, but relations between parents' attachment status and coparenting maintained after controlling for marital quality.

Conclusion—Prenatally assessed attachment status in both mothers and fathers predicts dimensions of coparenting early in the family life cycle. The impact of attachment status differs in important ways as a function of parent gender, and security in some cases exacerbated rather than buffered the negative impact of partner insecurity on coparental functioning. Effects of parental attachment security on coparenting cannot be properly estimated without reference to contextual factors.

Copyright © Taylor & Francis Group, LLC

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

Publisher's Disclaimer: The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

INTRODUCTION

The growing literature on coparenting (e.g., Gable, Belsky, & Crnic, 1992; Jouriles et al., 1991; McHale, 1995; McHale, 2007a, 2007b; Weissman & Cohen, 1985) represents an effort on the part of family researchers to operationalize and study evolving whole-family dynamics. *Coparenting* refers to the transactions occurring between two adults as they work together to rear a child or children for whom they share responsibility. The coparenting construct may be viewed as a specific form of triadic- or higher-level family process, in that all the interactions it comprises pertain to the partners' child and their shared connection to that child. Coparenting partners function effectively to the extent that they create for children a sense of the family environment as secure, predictable, nurturing, and governed by consistent standards (McHale, 2007b).

Extensive findings on coparenting reveal specific implications of coparenting quality for children's well-being: Cooperative, warm coparenting, with participation balanced between partners, augurs well for children's socioemotional adjustment. By contrast, coparenting disturbances place children at increased risk for a range of internalizing and externalizing problems and insecure attachment (see McHale, 2007a, 2007b, 2009, for recent extensive reviews of this literature). Associations between coparenting and child outcomes remain even after taking the contributions of marital functioning and mother-child or father-child relationship quality into account (e.g., Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1996; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, Lauretti, & Rasmussen, 2000; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998; Snyder, Klein, Gdowski, Faulstich, & LaCombe, 1988).

The coparenting concept emerged initially from family theories based on observations of Western nuclear families (e.g., Haley, 1988; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The applicability of the construct for other cultures and types of family systems remains an open question requiring further examination by indigenous investigators (McHale, 2007b, 2009), though extant data indicate that co-caregiving dynamics are relevant to understanding child rearing in Middle Eastern (Feldman, Masalha, & Nadam, 2001) and Asian (Kurrien & Vo, 2004; McHale, Rao, & Krasnow, 2000) families as well as in North American families headed by mother-grandmother dyads (e.g., Apfel & Seitz, 1996; Brody, Flor, & Neubaum, 1998; Chase-Lansdale, Gordon, & Coley, 1999; Goodman & Silverstein, 2002) and same-sex couples (e.g., Patterson & Chan, 1999).

The Transition to Parenthood as a Transition to Coparenting Partnership

The transition to new parenthood is of particular interest to coparenting researchers, who have naturally been drawn to a fresh exploration of this period in the nuclear family's life cycle when coparenting alliances first come into being. In studies of coparenting adjustment among married, heterosexual couples, distinctive patterns of triadic family interaction have been discerned within 100 days of a firstborn child's birth, and these early-emerging patterns foreshadow aspects of coparenting into the toddler years (e.g., Gable, Belsky, & Crnic, 1995; Fivaz-Depeursinge, Frascarolo, & Corboz-Warnery, 1996; McHale & Rotman, 2007; Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004). Researchers' ability to detect and chart the early course of coparenting adaptations is noteworthy, as other data indicate that coparenting problems in the first year after the transition to parenthood predict children's adjustment difficulties up to age 4 (Fivaz et al., 1996; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998; Frosch, Mangelsdorf, & McHale, 2000).

Predictors of Coparenting Across the Transition to Parenthood: What We Know So Far

Given the potential enduring impact of emergent coparenting processes on child development and psychopathology, interest has grown in those factors operative prior to the parenthood

transition that set the stage for differential development of coparenting dynamics. These include several marital adjustment indicators, including ease in sharing affect-laden information (Lewis, Owen, & Cox, 1988), escalation of negative affect (Lindahl, Clements, & Markman, 1997), and withdrawal from interactions with spouses (Paley et al., 2005). Marital strife before the birth of a first child forecasts later coparenting discord and miscoordination, whereas positive marital adjustment during a first pregnancy predicts cooperation in the coparenting domain. Most prior studies evaluated adjustment in family triads from 1 to 5 years after partners became first-time parents. Fewer data are available linking prenatal marital functioning to coparenting dynamics during the very first stages of family life, a focus of the current report.

Besides marital quality, certain dimensions of expectant parents' family relationship representations also foreshadow later coparenting patterns. The developmental trajectory of early coparenting has been linked in prospective studies to prebirth expectancies and concerns about future family life (McHale et al., 2004), and to the ability to envision (von Klitzing, Simoni, Amsler, & Burgin, 1999) and even role-play (Carneiro, Corboz-Warnery, & Fivaz-Depeursinge, 2006) future family interactions featuring positive emotional connections among all members of the triad.

These studies highlight the power of individuals' subjective, representational worlds to shape their interpretations and actions in their families of generation, and suggest an obvious new focus for coparenting research, that is, the study of adults' attachment representations in relation to coparenting behavior. Though the construct of adult attachment has a wealth of data illuminating its significance for dyadic relationship functioning, the formative influence of adult attachment status in the establishment of a coparental alliance that fosters a secure family base for the child (see, e.g., Byng-Hall, 1995; Davies & Cummings, 1994; McHale, 1997) has yet to be addressed extensively. Examination of this topic is a central aim of the present study.

Adult Attachment Status and Relationships Within Families

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980), individuals distill recurring features of interactions with caregivers in early childhood to form internal working models of attachment (i.e., generalized cognitive-affective representations of self and other in close relationships). These representations organize a person's expectations about attachment relationships in later life, guiding behavior and modes of regulating affects in attachment-related situations (e.g., Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Sensitive, contingently responsive parenting is believed to promote security in attachment representations, whereas adverse experiences with caregivers (e.g., rejection, role reversal, harshness, neglect) tend to give rise to insecurity (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

Main and colleagues (e.g., Main & Goldwyn, 1998; Hesse, 1999) developed the most widely used, best validated system for eliciting and assessing adults' representations of attachment. According to this system, Secure adults are those who value connections with others, view relationships as potential sources of support, acknowledge and contain affect, and reflect with minimal bias on affect-laden information from past and present personal history. By contrast, Insecure adults either dismiss the importance of close relationships and attachment-related affects or appear overwhelmed and unhappily preoccupied when reflecting on attachment issues. Though attachment representations are theoretically open to revision in the wake of attachment-related experiences that diverge markedly from an individual's early history, they operate largely outside awareness, and are therefore relatively stable and trait-like (Bowlby, 1969/1982).

Attachment security as assessed with Main's system is related both to adults' own emotional well-being (e.g., Hesse, 1999; Kobak & Sceery, 1988) and to their functioning in family

subsystems. Secure partners display more positive behaviors, regulate affect more successfully, and show more skills in seeking and providing contingently responsive support in couple interactions than participants rated Insecure (e.g., Cohn, Silver, Cowan, Cowan, & Pearson, 1992; Creasey, 2002; Crowell, Treboux, Gao, et al., 2002; Paley, Cox, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999; Simpson, Rholes, Orina, & Grich, 2002). Evidence for broader systemic effects of adult attachment security is more limited, though in one relevant study, Dickstein, Seifer, Albus, & Magee (2004) determined that the absolute mean of family functioning scores for families with Insecure mothers fell in the clinically distressed range, whereas the mean for families with Secure mothers was in the nonclinical range.

In short, attachment security is an emotional resource for individuals. It allows adults to serve as secure bases, to elicit care, and hence to enhance the quality of family relationships. Though it would seem to follow that each parent's attachment security should contribute, in additive fashion, to coparenting harmony in a newly formed family triad, the implications of adult attachment status within the family system are not completely straightforward; contextual factors have qualifying effects, as discussed next.

Does Adult Attachment Status Play a Moderating Role in the Development of Early Coparenting Dynamics?

When studied in interaction with couple relationship quality, security appears to serve as an asset, and insecurity a liability, principally in the presence of stress (e.g., Eiden, Teti, & Corns, 1995; Paley, Cox, Harter, & Margand, 2002). For example, Insecure male college students display more negative behaviors during conflict resolution tasks with romantic partners than do Secure men, but Secure and Insecure men behave similarly during neutral couple interactions (Creasey, 2002). Similarly, when negative escalation is a feature of the couple's marital process, greater marital declines across the transition to new parenthood are reported by both Insecure men and their wives than by Secure husbands and their wives (Paley et al., 2002). But when negative escalation is low, couples with Insecure and Secure husbands do not differ in how they portray their marriages. This evidence supports Bowlby's (1980) contention that individual differences in attachment are most apparent and influential among those confronting challenge or strain to their marriages or other attachment relationships; Secure adults should be better able than Insecure ones to modulate negative affect and maintain constructive behavioral engagement even when feeling pressured or depleted by conflicts with significant others.

Do adult attachment and marital adjustment interact in similar ways to shape coparenting or other triadic family processes? Fewer data are available on this question, though Paley et al.'s (2005) study provides some leads. High negative escalation predicted less positivity in whole-family affect at 24 months only when fathers were Insecure; when they were Secure, negative escalation was unrelated to family-level positivity. Curiously, prenatal negative escalation predicted increased negative affect during family interactions in families with Insecure fathers, but it predicted decreased negativity in the family group for Secure fathers.

These data describe effects of interactions between men's insecurity and marital adjustment. There are also limited data on how marital partners' dyadic attachment representations moderate each other's effects on family process. Cohn, Silver, et al. (1992) found that Insecure–Secure and Secure–Secure dyads showed similar levels of warmth and conflict within the family triad and that both groups displayed better functioning than did Insecure–Insecure couples. In this instance, attachment security in one partner served as a protective factor, diminishing negative effects of the partner's insecurity on their dyadic interactions.

A straightforward application of these principles to the functioning of triadic relationship systems, however, may not be warranted. Very few data shed light on how maternal and

paternal attachment security interact in explaining early coparenting patterns, but Paley et al.'s (2005) study affords germane insights. Examining dyadic coalitions that excluded the third family member, they found that associations between negative marital escalation and coalition establishment depended on the attachment status of both mothers and fathers. When one partner was Secure and the other Insecure, higher negative escalation predicted more coalition formation; when both were Insecure, negative escalation was unrelated to coalition formation; and when both were Secure, higher negative escalation predicted fewer coalitions. Apparently, the significance of mothers' and fathers' attachment status for triadic functioning may differ from that for dyadic relationship functioning. Whereas it is easy to view the other parent's security as an asset (as in Cohn, Silver, et al.'s study), security and the greater parenting confidence it may breed may threaten Insecure partners and evoke negative reactions, as appeared to be the case in Paley's work. Whether partner security heightens or alleviates coparenting adjustment difficulties for Insecure mothers and/or fathers is an open question.

Does it Matter Which Parent is Insecure?

If insecurity compromises establishment of a mutually supportive coparental alliance, are the effects similar when it is the mother whose state of mind with respect to attachment is insecure rather than the father? The literature provides some hints as to possible differential effects of maternal and paternal insecurity during the early postpartum months. The effects of fathers' intrusion into mothers' sphere of influence have been discussed extensively; Gatrell (2007), for example, outlines how some women welcome active paternal engagement with infants whereas others resist paternal efforts, viewing them as an intrusion and threat to maternal entitlements. Though no studies have examined whether Secure and Insecure mothers differ in terms of their willingness to welcome the father into the triad, Insecure women by definition have greater difficulty investing their trust in relationships. As a result, they may be less open to sharing parenting influence with their partners—perhaps especially in circumstances where fathers themselves assert a more active desire to be engaged coparents from the outset. To the extent that insecurity in the mother undermines her confidence in her partner's capacity for co-creating a healthy, balanced alliance to coparent the child, greater conflict may emerge in the family's early coparental dynamics.

By contrast, because men's early parenting engagement with infants is more variable than women's, paternal insecurity may influence the early coparenting dynamic in a different way. Normatively, fathers frequently report feeling outsiders to the intense and evolving mother–infant relationship. Still, fathers can and do determine their own involvement (Walker & McGraw, 2000), even in the face of mothers' resistance. When fathers have insecure states of mind with respect to attachment, they may be more apt to readily assume a “third wheel” position and exclude themselves, or accept exclusion from, full participation in creating together a cooperative and cohesive triad. To the extent that this is so, paternal insecurity may be more likely to give rise to low coparental cohesion rather than to breed high coparental conflict.

Current Study Overview

Research to date indicates that secure states of mind with respect to attachment serve as an asset for adults in dyadic relationships with partners and children. Unclear, however, is the manner by which adult attachment security comes to structure early coparenting relationships. Effects of maternal and paternal attachment may vary as a function of marital adjustment quality and/or the security or insecurity of the coparenting partner. To address gaps in the current literature, the present study examined aftereffects of prebirth marital quality and of parents' generalized dyadic attachment representations on triadic coparenting processes 3 months after the transition to new parenthood. We examined both cohesive and conflictual

coparenting outcomes to determine whether there might indeed be different effects for maternal and paternal attachment status. Our specific hypotheses were as follows.

Main effects—(1) We expected prebirth marital quality to predict both dimensions of coparenting quality under study, with higher levels of marital quality foreshadowing higher coparenting cohesion and lower coparenting conflict. (2) We hypothesized that prebirth attachment status in mothers and fathers would also be related to both aspects of coparenting, and that effects of maternal and paternal attachment status would be apparent after accounting for effects of marital quality. Attachment security was predicted to be associated with higher cohesion and lower conflict for both parents. However, we also predicted that maternal attachment security would show more marked ties to coparenting conflict than to coparenting cohesion, whereas the impact of paternal attachment security was expected to be more pronounced for cohesion than for conflict.

Moderating effects—(1) We hypothesized that attachment security in either parent would buffer both dimensions of coparenting from adverse influences of marital distress. (2) We expected that mothers' and fathers' attachment status would moderate each other's effects on coparenting cohesion and conflict. Given the scant and conflicting evidence relating interactions between partners' attachment status to coparenting, we made no more specific predictions regarding the nature of this moderating effect.

METHODS

Participants

Participants were 87 couples expecting their first child together, and later, their 3-month-old sons ($n = 39$) and daughters ($n = 48$). Couples were recruited from prenatal classes at area hospitals. All but one couple was married,¹ with length of marriage ranging from 1 to 11 years (M length of marriage = 3.98 years; M length as a couple = 6.99 years). The average age at the time of the prenatal assessment was 33.20 years for men (range = 21 to 52 years) and 31.30 years for women (range = 22 to 47 years). Median family income fell in the \$75,000 to \$80,000 range in 2003 U.S. dollars. All participants completed high school, with a mean education for wives equaling 15.94 years and for husbands equaling 16.06 years. Ninety percent of the study participants were European American, 8% identified themselves as African American, Asian American, or Latin American, and 2% indicated that they were "other." Eight percent of the women had been married previously, as had 6% of the men. Two mothers and one father reported children from a previous marriage. Information regarding day care at 3 months was available for a portion of the overall sample ($n = 37$). Of these children, 36% were in day care, with a mean number of 22.41 hours per week for those who attended (range = 1 to 52 hours). No variable of interest (marital quality, attachment, or coparenting) differed as a function of day care status (attended versus did not attend) or number of hours in day care at 3 months. Likewise, these variables did not differ as a function of whether or not participants were European American. Family income and individual education were each positively related to prebirth marital quality but were unrelated to attachment status and the coparenting variables, so controlling for these demographic markers was not in order.

Procedures

Couples attended a prenatal visit at a university-based Family Study Center. At this visit, couples completed questionnaires and participated in individual interviews designed to assess their states of mind with respect to attachment. The couples also participated in discussions from which marital process was coded. Each partner rated aspects of their relationship for

¹Results of all analyses conducted with the unmarried couple omitted were consistent with those presented herein.

which they did and did not desire change (Sagrestano, Christensen, & Heavey, 1998), and two topics were then chosen by experimenters for use in the problem-solving discussions. The first discussion focused on a topic identified as an area of desired change by the husband but not the wife, and the second discussion focused on an issue identified by the wife but not the husband. Following the discussion, each individual rated aspects of their own and their partner's behavior during the interaction, and these ratings were also included in the measurement of marital quality.

When the couples' children were approximately 3 months old, families were visited in their homes and were led through several tasks designed to measure coparenting. Tasks included two triadic family interaction tasks and one problem-solving task that focused on disagreements regarding the division of child care and that occurred while parents were caring for the infant. Two of the 87 couples were unable to complete the 3-month visit, resulting in a final sample size of 85 families (48 with daughters and 37 with sons). Of the two couples who did not complete the 3-month visit, one couple was generally representative of the larger sample with regard to income and prebirth marital quality, and included a Secure mother and an Insecure father. The other couple reported income within the bottom third of the sample, obtained a relatively low marital quality score, and included two Secure partners.

Measures

Prebirth states of mind with respect to attachment—The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996) and its accompanying manual, the Adult Attachment Scoring and Classification System (AASCS; Main & Goldwyn, 1998), were used together to elicit and classify adults' current representations of early attachments. The reliability and validity of the AAI and AASCS are well established (see Crowell & Treboux, 1995; Hesse, 1999; van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1996, for details on psychometric properties). The AAI, a 45- to 90-minute-long semi-structured interview, focuses on respondents' experiences with primary caregivers in childhood. Participants are asked to give general descriptions of early attachment relationships, provide specific anecdotes in support of these descriptions, reflect on experiences of separation, rejection, or abuse at the hands of parents, discuss significant losses and traumas, and comment on the impact of their attachment histories on their present lives and parenting practices.

According to protocol established by George et al. (1996), AAIs were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then rated on 23 9-point scales. Ten of these scales reflect judges' inferences regarding the probable quality of the respondent's experiences with parents in childhood, and record the degree to which each of two primary caregivers appeared loving, neglecting, rejecting, overinvolved, or overly insistent on the respondent's achievement. Thirteen scales measure dimensions of the respondent's current state of mind with respect to attachment, including insistence on lack of memory, idealization of caregivers, preoccupying anger, derogation of attachment, and overall narrative coherence. These dimensional ratings are used to assign respondents to one of three major categories of attachment status—Secure, Insecure–Dismissing, and Insecure–Preoccupied—each of which represents an organized discourse strategy (i.e., a systematic approach to addressing attachment-related topics and coping with attachment-related affects).

Secure respondents give highly coherent accounts of their histories, attribute importance to attachment-related issues and feelings, and discuss both positive and negative experiences with relative ease. Insecure individuals are generally less coherent, failing to communicate clearly or to integrate specific memories of attachment experiences with the meanings they ascribe to these experiences. The interviews of Insecure–Dismissing individuals are characterized by some combination of idealization, reported lack of memory, and derogation or dismissal of attachment. Insecure–Preoccupied respondents tend to exhibit overinvolvement and confusion

with respect to attachment issues, sometimes accompanied by anger or fear toward attachment figures. In rare instances, respondents fail to show consistent use of any one organized discourse strategy and are rated Cannot Classify. In addition to being assigned to one of the four groups described above, individuals may be designated as Unresolved. When discussing losses or trauma, individuals with this designation show lack of resolution of distress and disorientation in the form of lapses in the monitoring of reasoning or discourse (see Hesse, 1999, for detailed description of AAI and AASCS). In the present study, we followed Treboux, Crowell, and Waters (2004) in using the three major attachment categories to assign all participants into Secure or Insecure groups, basing the assignment of those rated Unresolved on the alternate organized category to which they belonged (i.e., Secure, Insecure–Dismissing, Insecure–Preoccupied).²

In this study, transcripts of AAIs were rated by three judges who had established inter-rater reliability with an expert coder from Dr. Mary Main's laboratory on a separate sample of 30 transcripts. AAI categories in our sample were distributed as follows for women: 72% Secure ($n = 61$, 7 also Unresolved), 22% Insecure–Dismissing ($n = 19$, 1 also Unresolved), and 6% Insecure–Preoccupied ($n = 5$, 2 also Unresolved). For men, AAI categories were distributed as follows: 64% Secure ($n = 54$, 6 also Unresolved), 28% Insecure–Dismissing ($n = 24$, 4 also Unresolved), and 8% Insecure–Preoccupied ($n = 7$, 6 also Unresolved). These percentages are roughly similar to findings from a meta-analysis by van IJzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg (1996), whose overall distribution of nonclinical mothers included 58% Secure, 24% Insecure–Dismissing, and 18% Insecure–Preoccupied (with the distribution of nonclinical fathers being similar to that of mothers). Although the present sample includes more Secure individuals and fewer Insecure–Preoccupied classifications than the overall findings of van IJzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg (1996), our distribution is similar to several of the individual studies reviewed in the meta-analysis, including those by DeKlyen (1992; 80% Secure, 8% Insecure–Preoccupied) and Cohn, Silver, et al. (1992; 81% Secure, 7% Insecure–Preoccupied).

Prenatal marital quality—Three sources of data were used to generate an index of prebirth marital quality: self reports of marital satisfaction, clinical ratings of interaction during the marital problem-solving task, and ratings by participants of own and partner's behavior during the marital interaction task. The first two measures have been used previously by our laboratory to create a composite of marital functioning. Detailed descriptions of the measures can be found elsewhere (McHale et al., 2004), along with reliability and validity data for the present sample at this time point. A brief summary of these measures follows.

Couples completed the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959) as a measure of overall marital satisfaction. The MAT is widely used, and its reliability and validity are well documented (e.g., Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977). Descriptive statistics for the MAT in this sample are presented in Table 1, along with statistics for all other marital and coparenting measures. Mothers' and fathers' MAT scores were significantly correlated, $r(83) = .65$, $p < .001$, and were combined into a single score representing self-reported marital quality.

²As Treboux et al. (2004) noted, findings indicate that the Unresolved designation is less stable than the major categories (Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 2002; Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 1993), and that those whose Unresolved rating is based on loss differ in significant ways from those whose rating is based on traumatic experiences (Crowell, Treboux, Waters, et al., 2002). Moreover, and most importantly for our purposes, the Unresolved designation appears to have different implications depending on whether respondents are given alternate classifications of Secure vs. Insecure, with Unresolved/Secure individuals showing better functioning than Unresolved/Insecure in both parenting (Schuengel, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van IJzendoorn, 1999) and partner (Creasey, 2002) relationships. Thus, it appeared reasonable to include Unresolved/Secure participants in the Secure group and to place Unresolved/Insecure with the Insecure.

Clinical ratings of marital quality were coded by advanced graduate students from videotapes of the prebirth problem-solving discussions, using Cox, Tresch-Owen, and Lewis's (1989) adaptation of the Beavers-Timberlawn couples rating system. This system has been used in numerous papers by our laboratory (e.g., McHale, 1995; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, et al., 2000), where detailed descriptions of the six main constructs—intimacy of communication, warmth, power, autonomy, problemsolving, and overt conflict—can be found. Ratings were made on a scale of 1 (*low*) to 9 (*high*), and means and standard deviations for the present sample are presented in Table 1. Inter-rater reliabilities, a description of coder training, and further evidence of construct validity for this system, with this sample at this same time point, can be found in McHale et al. (2004). These authors performed a factor analysis on the six scores generated from the marital coding system and concluded that the six scores (with negative-valence items reversed) could be combined into a single, reliable composite score of observed marital quality, α for the present study = .89.

The third and final measure of prenatal marital functioning included men's and women's ratings of their own and their partner's behavior during the marital interaction task. Following the marital interaction, each couple rated, on a 9-point scale, the extent to which they agreed with each of 24 statements (e.g., "During the interaction I was withdrawn and silent"; "During the interaction, my partner was critical and blaming"). A detailed description of the postdiscussion questionnaire (PDQ) with study families at 12 months can be found in Talbot and McHale (2004). Analyses by Talbot and McHale indicated that PDQ ratings can be collapsed across items, across report about self and partner, and across respondents. For the present study, each individual's negatively valenced items were reverse coded and combined with the positive items, resulting in single scores for each adult participant's report on self and partner, α = .83. The scores were then combined across the ratings for themselves and their partners, and across respondents (i.e., mother report on self, mother report on partner, father report on self, and father report on other were all combined), α = .88, to create a single, positively valenced score for the PDQ. As the MAT, marital observation codes, and PDQ measures were all significantly correlated in the prenatal sample (r ranging from .26, $p < .05$, to .50, $p < .001$), they were standardized and combined to create a single, positively valenced composite score indexing prenatal marital quality.

3-month coparenting—Composites of 3-month coparental cohesion and conflict were derived from observational coding of three separate family interactions. Detailed descriptions of these paradigms, the accompanying coding systems, and reliability and validity for this sample at this time point can be found in McHale and Rotman (2007). A brief summary follows.

Two triadic interaction paradigms were used to assess coparenting behavior at 3 months. The Lausanne Trilogue Play (LTP; Fivaz-Depeursinge & Corboz-Warnery, 1999) leads families through four distinct forms of interaction. In the first part, one parent plays with the baby while the second parent is instructed simply to be present. The parents then switch roles for the second part of the task. In the third part, all three family members play together and, finally, the adults interact while the baby is placed in the "third party" position. The second triadic assessment was adapted from Tronick and Gianino's (1986) Still Face procedure. In this paradigm, both parents are instructed to play with the baby for 2 minutes. The couple is then instructed to pose with motionless faces for 2 minutes, without responding to the baby's bids. Finally, the couple works together to soothe the child and to reestablish equilibrium.

Each of the two triadic paradigms was videotaped and coded using an adaptation of the Coparenting and Family Rating System (CFRS; McHale, Berkman, Kavanaugh, Parmley, & Alberts, 2009). Ratings of warmth and cooperation from the LTP and Still Face were made on scales of 1 (*low*) to 5 (*high*) and were standardized and combined to create a preliminary score of coparental cohesion. Ratings of competition and verbal sparring were similarly rated and

contributed to a preliminary conflict score. See McHale and Rotman (2007) for a complete description of inter-rater reliability and across-time stability of these ratings.

The third and final paradigm used to assess coparental cohesion and conflict was a discussion of perceived differences concerning the division of childcare labor (see Frosch, Mangelsdorf, & McHale, 1998, 2000; McHale & Rotman, 2007). After independently completing copies of Cowan and Cowan's (1988) "Who Does What" questionnaire, parents shared their responses with their spouses and were instructed to work together to come to consensus on each item while simultaneously tending to their baby. Videotapes of the interactions were coded using 0 (*low*) to 3 (*high*) scales, for positive tone, capacity to reach consensus, overall collaboration, negative tone, and each partner's defensiveness (Elliston, Alvarez, & McHale, 2005; McHale & Rotman, 2007). The first three codes were summed, standardized, and combined with the preliminary cohesion score from the LTP and Still Face to create a final 3-month coparental cohesion score. Negative tone and each partner's defensiveness were summed, standardized, and combined with the preliminary conflict score from the LTP and Still Face to generate a final composite of 3-month coparental conflict. See McHale and Rotman (2007) for further information on this system with this sample, including inter-rater reliability data. These authors found the internal consistencies of these overall scales to be adequate (cohesion, $\alpha = .73$, and conflict, $\alpha = .71$).

RESULTS

Analyses are presented in the following order. First, correlations and *t* tests are presented summarizing basic relations among the variables of interest and testing the hypotheses that both prebirth marital quality and each partner's prebirth state of mind with regard to attachment would be related to 3-month coparental cohesion and conflict. Second, hierarchical regressions are presented addressing whether (1) each parent's prebirth state of mind with regard to attachment contributed unique variance above and beyond prebirth marital quality and (2) marital quality moderated the relation between attachment security and coparenting. Finally, we summarize MANOVA analyses (rather than regressions, given the dichotomous nature of both predictor variables) examining interactions between partners' attachment security in the prediction of coparenting.

Interrelations Among Prenatal AAI Assignments, Prenatal Marital Quality, and 3-Month Coparenting

Prenatal marital functioning in this sample, somewhat surprisingly, was not related to either parent's prenatal attachment status. Prenatal marital quality did significantly predict 3-month coparental cohesion, $r(83) = .37, p < .01$, but not early conflict. Individuals' AAI assignments were not related to those of their partners as per chi-square analysis.

As anticipated, families with Insecure mothers were rated higher on coparental conflict at 3 months than families with Secure mothers, $t(83) = 2.33, p < .05$. Fathers' prenatal states of mind with respect to attachment also forecast coparenting at 3 months. As expected, families of Secure fathers were rated significantly higher on coparental cohesion at 3 months than were families of Insecure fathers, $t(83) = -2.24, p < .05$. Unexpectedly, however, families of Secure fathers were also rated higher on coparental conflict than were families of fathers with insecure states of mind, $t(83) = -2.03, p < .05$. Means and standard deviations for each coparenting variable as a function of parent AAI assignment are summarized in Table 2.

Regressions with Prenatal Variables Predicting 3-Month Coparenting

Four regression analyses were performed to examine the unique contribution of each parent's attachment status and of marital quality to coparenting cohesion and conflict, and to establish

whether marital functioning moderated AAI-coparenting relations. In each of the four analyses, marital quality and the relevant parent's AAI assignment were entered on Step 1, with the AAI-by-marital quality interaction term entered on Step 2. Mother and father AAI scores were not entered together in these analyses both because controlling for partners' assignment would make interpretation of any interactions difficult and because associations between partners' assignments are examined in the following section.

As shown in Table 3, prenatal marital quality showed a significant relation with 3-month cohesion but not conflict. Mothers' prenatal AAI assignments continued to be predictive of 3-month coparental conflict. Fathers' prenatal AAI assignments made unique contributions to the variance in both cohesion and conflict even with marital quality accounted for. None of the four regressions suggested a significant interaction between parental AAIs and marital quality in predicting 3-month coparenting.

Interactions Between Mother and Father Prebirth AAI Assignments, Predicting to 3-Month Coparenting

A 2 (mother Secure versus Insecure) $\times$ 2 (father Secure versus Insecure) MANOVA was conducted with the two 3-month coparenting scores as dependent variables. The overall analysis suggested that a significant interaction existed between mother and father AAI ratings, $F(2, 80) = 5.03, p < .01$, and specifically indicated that these scores interacted to predict 3-month coparental cohesion, $F(1, 81) = 9.83, p < .01$. In the context of a Secure mother, families with Secure fathers exhibited higher cohesion than did families with Insecure fathers, $t(59) = -3.35, p < .05$ (see Table 4). Mothers' and fathers' security did not interact significantly to predict coparental conflict, though the previously discussed main effects were evident.

To assist with interpretation, four groups were created based on the levels from the original MANOVA. As seen in Figure 1, the combination of mother-Secure/father Insecure ($n = 20$) bred the lowest level of coparenting cohesion, followed by father-Secure/mother-Insecure ($n = 13$). Curiously, dyads in which both parents were Insecure ($n = 11$) exhibited coparenting more similar to dyads in which both members were secure ($n = 41$). However, in that the group of Insecure/Insecure dyads was rather small, these findings should be interpreted with due caution.

A follow-up MANOVA was conducted with the four groups to examine which differences between groups were statistically significant. The overall MANOVA was significant, $F(6, 162) = 4.59, p < .001$, and indicated that group differences existed not only in cohesion as previously suggested, $F(3, 81) = 5.14, p < .01$, but also in coparental conflict, $F(3, 81) = 3.82, p < .05$. Scheffé post hoc analyses revealed that the mother-Secure/father-Insecure dyads were lowest on cohesion and were significantly lower than dyads in which both members were Secure, $p < .01$. Analyses also revealed that father-Secure/mother-Insecure dyads exhibited the highest levels of coparenting conflict, and that these dyads were significantly higher in conflict than dyads in which father was Insecure and mother was Secure, $p < .05$.

Taken together, the above analyses suggest that the relations between parental security and 3-month coparenting are complex in nature. Although a main effect for father security on cohesion was observed, the significant interaction between father and mother security suggests that interpretation of the main effect is not useful but rather that the relation between father security and coparental cohesion depends entirely on maternal security. In contrast, relations between parental security and conflict did not exhibit a moderation effect but rather an additive, or cumulative, effect on coparental conflict. Independent from their partners' security status, Insecure mothers and Secure fathers both appeared to promote higher levels of coparental conflict.

DISCUSSION

Previous investigators have reported that an adult's attachment security enhances the harmony of intrafamilial relationships involving that person (e.g., Cohn, Cowan, Cowan, & Pearson, 1992; Cohn, Silver, et al., 1992; Crowell, Treboux, Gao, et al., 2002; Dickstein et al., 2004). Results of the current study, however, echoing findings of Paley et al. (2005), suggest that the meaning of adult attachment security in triadic family dynamics is not always so straightforwardly good. Implications of maternal and paternal attachment for coparenting adaptation cannot be properly estimated without reference to relevant contextual factors, which may include individual interpretations of socially constructed gender roles.

Our findings indicated, first, that implications of attachment security versus insecurity for coparenting conflict varied according to parent gender. Specifically, coparenting partnerships were more troubled by conflict in families where mothers were Insecure than they were in families where mothers were Secure. Where fathers were concerned, however, the story was different: Heightened coparenting conflict was more prominent in families of Secure fathers. This finding is especially intriguing in light of findings that attachment security looks to have similar benefits for the functioning of both men and women in dyadic parenting relationships. Security in both mothers and fathers has been linked to enhanced caregiver sensitivity as well as to children's secure attachment (van IJzendoorn, 1995). Secure men and women are also more effective than Insecure individuals in seeking and providing emotional support when interacting with intimate partners (Crowell, Treboux, Gao, et al., 2002). Therefore, to make sense of our observations regarding the differential significance of men's versus women's attachment status for coparenting, it may be useful first to sketch the probable baseline behavior of men versus women in the family triad.

Numerous commentators describe how societal expectations prime women to regard themselves as having principal responsibility for child rearing and the emotional well-being of family members (e.g., Luepnitz, 1988; McHale & Fivaz-Depeursinge, 1999; Strazdins, Galligan, & Scannell, 1997). Others note that some women cherish the special status that motherhood confers within the family (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 1992), and that some new mothers feel ill at ease when their primacy as caregivers is not taken for granted by their husbands (Gattrell, 2007). Perhaps in response to these prevailing definitions of mothering, it is normative for women to take the lead in structuring interactions in the family triad, and for men to follow that lead (e.g., Johnson, 2001).

This background suggests reasons why an Insecure mother might be highly vulnerable to working at cross purposes with her partner as the two begin to lay the foundations of their coparenting partnership. Although the Insecure mother may struggle to respond contingently and effectively to infant cues, she may still operate on the assumption that soothing the baby is her job. Moreover, her Insecure status may make her disinclined to view her spouse as a respectful, helpful collaborator in the coparenting situation, and she may be prone to regard paternal involvement as unwelcome and undermining of her position in the family; thus, coparenting in her family may come to be largely defined by her attempts to fend off her husband's perceived intrusions. Although a Secure mother may also approach coparenting interactions with an expectation that her leadership role will be acknowledged, she may be more apt to interpret her partner's coparenting behaviors as gestures of support, and may thus be less likely to engage in competition or negativity.

Less clear is why the Secure status of fathers has the opposite effect, increasing risk for early coparenting conflict. One possibility is that the default inclination of Insecure fathers, uneasy in triadic interactions emphasizing attachment-related themes, is to detach emotionally and behaviorally from coparenting. This preference for a relatively low level of involvement would

be congruent with social norms and with many men's and women's expectations for triadic interactions during the infancy period. Secure fathers, by contrast, may show both interest and skill in providing sensitive care to infants. If Secure men made more frequent bids to play an active role in coparenting—perhaps especially when mother–infant interactions went awry—there would be more occasions to clash, an especially likely eventuality if mothers were themselves Insecure.

Although coparental conflict is generally related to poor child and family outcomes, we suggest that under certain circumstances conflict that represents a Secure father's desire to remain a salient coparent in the context of either exclusionary practices and/or lower quality parenting by his Insecure wife may prove beneficial for the family unit in the longer run. For some such families, conflict at this early point of coparental adjustment may represent a temporary state of disequilibrium that, over time, may organize into a coparental structure that would not have been possible had the father acquiesced early on. The proposition that conflict at 3 months may represent an ongoing, dynamic process of shaping for some families is supported by our finding that prebirth marital quality related to cohesion, but not conflict, at this time point. Equally, however, the reasonable stability of coparenting and family alliances from 3 months forward (e.g. Fivaz-Depeursinge & Corboz-Warnery, 1999; McHale & Rotman, 2007) suggests that many families may not be able to adequately reconcile early conflict in this manner.

We also draw attention to the finding that the impact of fathers' attachment status on coparenting cohesion depended on mothers' status. Coparenting dyads in which both fathers and mothers were Secure exhibited the highest levels of coparenting cohesion, whereas Insecure fathers paired with Secure wives displayed the lowest levels. Two Secure partners might be at an advantage in forging a cohesive coparenting alliance for several reasons: both parents would show an aptitude for sensitive infant care, enjoy their baby, and rely better on each other for support; a Secure mother, better attuned to her partner's interest, may also invite and enable his participation in the triad, as the Secure father both initiates and responds openly. By contrast, when an Insecure father withdraws from coparenting interactions, his Secure partner may not challenge his withdrawal, both because this behavior appears normative to her and because she herself feels competent and comfortable with her infant. With mother and baby absorbed in each other and father standing to one side, partners may have reduced opportunities for sharing and collaborating in the care of their infant. Finally, the finding that father security foreshadows lower cohesion in the context of an Insecure mother is fully consistent with our previous discussion of coparental conflict; an Insecure mother may find it particularly difficult to promote family cohesion in the context of unwelcome involvement from a Secure father, who would likely find it difficult to support the mother in turn.

Each of these findings is consistent with premises that drove this study. More puzzling is the finding that families in which both partners were Insecure did not differ markedly in overall degrees of coparenting conflict and cohesion from families with two Secure partners. Whereas Insecure–Insecure dyads may witness limited conflict if Insecure mothers guard their leadership role and Insecure fathers readily acquiesce to a secondary position, for reasons suggested earlier, far less clear is why coparenting cohesion does not appear dampened in such families. Perhaps the triangular nature of the coparenting assessments we used enabled Insecure parents to divert attention from the spousal relationship and onto the baby (see Fivaz-Depeursinge & Favez, 2006). If this finding concerning early adjustment proved to be replicable, we might expect this seeming cohesion to dissipate over time as the child became a more active participant in triadic dynamics.

Ascribing emotional disengagement to Insecure fathers and resistance of support to Insecure mothers connotes an Insecure–Dismissing attachment stance; it is less consonant with the Insecure–Preoccupied style. As we noted, Insecure–Preoccupied individuals were

underrepresented in our sample relative to population norms, an important limitation of our study. More broadly, given our longitudinal study design and its intensive assessments of the family at multiple time points, we suspect that clinically disturbed couples were less inclined to volunteer to take part. Hence, whereas we consider it noteworthy that the conceptually meaningful pattern of findings outlined above was discovered in a community sample not selected on the basis of clinical risk, we recognize that the sequelae of maternal and paternal attachment may differ in higher-risk samples.

A subsidiary goal of this investigation was to examine how connections between prenatal marital functioning and coparenting vary as a function of parental attachment status. Structural, strategic, and Bowen family theories (e.g., Haley, 1988; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Minuchin, 1974) all posit that a strong alliance between spouses should promote harmony between coparenting partners, a linkage borne out by empirical research (e.g., Katz & Gottman, 1996; Lewis et al., 1988; McHale, 1995; Talbot & McHale, 2004). In this sample, prenatal marital quality likewise predicted coparenting cohesion at 3 months postpartum: Couples functioning well in their marriages before babies were born showed more warmth and cooperation in coparenting interactions with their infants. By contrast, prenatal marital functioning did not predict coparenting conflict at 3 months. Rather, mothers' and fathers' attachment status were more informative predictors of coparenting strife during the early infancy period, perhaps because generalized attachment representations influence the quality of each parent's responses toward the infant. Coparenting conflict at this stage of family life may hence be occasioned primarily by partners' disagreements about behaviors directed toward the baby. McHale et al. (2004) provide additional discussion of the lack of association between prenatal marital quality and coparenting conflict in this sample.

Attachment of parents also did not buffer 3-month coparenting from effects of prenatal marital disturbance. This finding is at odds with Paley et al.'s (2005) report that attachment security of fathers protected affective quality of whole-family interactions from prenatal negative marital escalation at 2 years. Three months postpartum may simply be too soon for any protective influence of fathers' security on coparenting to have coalesced. Palliative effects may take hold only after the child becomes a more active, aware participant in family process, at which point Secure fathers may adapt their behavior in the family triad to accommodate the child's changing emotional needs. Alternatively, as we have proposed, men's security may not buffer marital coparenting links during the earliest postpartum months if security itself instigates a temporary state of disequilibrium—though over time the early dissonance may eventually organize into a desirable coparenting structure (at which point such a buffering effect might be seen).

Finally, we recognize that not all contextual factors potentially affecting attachment-coparenting linkages were assessed in this study. Though analyses did not reveal any significant differences on important study variables as a function of day care status or hours, there are indications that by 12 months postpartum families with two working parents may behave more cooperatively during family interactions than those where just fathers work (McHale, 2007a). Moreover, the sample for this study was relatively homogeneous with respect to socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and education; sample size limitations made it impractical to conduct analyses as a function of these potentially important contextual factors, which are likely to play important roles in organizing the coparenting adaptations of many families. We also note the unanticipated finding that attachment was unrelated to marital adjustment in this sample.

Finally, this study does not put us in a position to comment on linkages between attachment and coparenting in nonnuclear family systems (McHale et al., 2002; McHale, 2009); the effects of adult attachment might prove especially meaningful when considering coparenting in extended kinship systems, for example. Research is needed to examine the significance of

attachment status in mother–grandmother coparenting teams, where the mother’s generalized attachment representation overlaps substantially with her specific internal working model of her relationship with her coparenting “partner.”

These limitations noted, we believe that the patterning of our findings—largely consistent with conceptually meaningful considerations from family systems theory—adds significant new substance to frameworks describing how early coparenting dynamics take shape in families. We prefer a “sharing the love” metaphor to the “dividing the child” concept already promulgated in the literature, but we believe these findings underscore the challenges families find in working to attain a cohesive family foundation during the early stages of family formation, and advocate further study of triadic and family-level dynamics as putative risks or assets in families of very young children.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Work on this report was supported by NICHD grants R01 HD42179 and K02 HD47505 “Prebirth predictors of early coparenting” to the third author. We thank administrators and staff at Clark University for their support during the data collection phase of this project; the many Worcester area families who contributed to the study; Christina Kazali, Julia Berkman, Nina Olsen, Dawn Vo, and Valerie Haskell for their assistance in conducting prenatal assessments; and Holly DiMario, Meagan Parmley, Amy Alberts, Kate Nielsen, Oliver Hartman, Stephanie Giampa, Eleanor Chaffe, and Rebecca Lieberman for their help with postpartum assessments. Kazali, Lieberman, Olsen, Naomi Gribneau, Sandy Fulton, Karen Jacob, Jessica Thompson, Chris Scull, Tamir Rotman, Donna Elliston, and Evelyn Alvarez provided clinical ratings of the attachment, marital, and coparenting data discussed in this article.

REFERENCES

- Ainsworth, MDS.; Blehar, MC.; Waters, E.; Wall, S. Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum; 1978.
- Apfel, N.; Seitz, V. African American adolescent mothers, their families, and their daughters: A longitudinal perspective over 12 years. In: Leadbeater, B.; Way, N., editors. *Urban girls: Resisting stereotypes, creating identities*. New York: New York University Press; 1996. p. 149-170.
- Bakermans-Kranenburg MJ, van IJzendoorn MH. A psychometric study of the Adult Attachment Interview: Reliability and discriminant validity. *Developmental Psychology* 1993;29:870–879.
- Belsky J, Putnam S, Crnic K. Coparenting, parenting, and early emotional development. *New Directions in Child Development* 1996;74:45–55.
- Bowlby, J. Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment. New York: Basic Books; 1969/1982.
- Bowlby, J. Attachment and loss: Vol. 2. Separation. New York: Basic Books; 1973.
- Bowlby, J. Attachment and loss: Vol. 3. Loss, sadness, and depression. New York: Basic Books; 1980.
- Brody, G.; Flor, P.; Neubaum, E. Coparenting processes and child competence among rural African American families. In: Lewis, M.; Feiring, C., editors. *Families, risk, and competence*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum; 1998. p. 227-243.
- Byng-Hall J. Creating a secure family base: Some implications of attachment theory for family therapy. *Family Process* 1995;34:45–58. [PubMed: 7628600]
- Carneiro C, Corboz-Warnery A, Fivaz-Depeursinge E. The prenatal Lausanne triogue play: A new observational assessment tool of the prenatal co-parenting alliance. *Infant Mental Health Journal* 2006;27:207–228.
- Chase-Lansdale, L.; Gordon, R.; Coley, R. Young African American multigenerational families in poverty: The contexts, exchanges, and processes of their lives. In: Hetherington, EM., editor. *Coping with divorce, single parenting, and remarriage: A risk and resiliency perspective*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum; 1999. p. 165-191.
- Cohn DA, Cowan PA, Cowan CP, Pearson J. Mothers’ and fathers’ working models of childhood attachment relationships, parenting styles, and child behavior. *Development and Psychopathology* 1992;4:417–431.
- Cohn DA, Silver DH, Cowan CP, Cowan PA, Pearson J. Working models of childhood attachment and couple relationships. *Journal of Family Issues* 1992;13:432–499.

- Cowan CP, Cowan PA. Who does what when partners become parents: Implications for men, women, and marriage. *Marriage and Family Review* 1988;12:105–131.
- Cowan, P.; Cowan, CP. When partners become parents: The big life change for couples. New York: Basic Books; 1992.
- Cox, M.; Tresch-Owen, M.; Lewis, J. Prebirth marital relationships and child development at age 2 ½; Paper presented at the Society for Research in Child Development; Washington, DC. 1989 Apr.
- Creasey G. Associations between working models of attachment and conflict management behavior in romantic couples. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 2002;49:365–375.
- Crowell JA, Treboux D. A review of adult attachment measures: Implications for theory and research. *Social Development* 1995;4:294–327.
- Crowell JA, Treboux D, Gao Y, Fyffe C, Pan H, Waters E. Assessing secure base behavior in adulthood: Development of a measure, links to adult attachment representations, and relations to a couples' communication and reports of relationships. *Developmental Psychology* 2002;38:679–693. [PubMed: 12220047]
- Crowell JA, Treboux D, Waters E. Stability of attachment representations: The transition to marriage. *Developmental Psychology* 2002;38:467–479. [PubMed: 12090478]
- Davies PT, Cummings EM. Marital conflict and child adjustment: An emotional security hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin* 1994;116:387–411. [PubMed: 7809306]
- DeKlyen, OM. Doctoral dissertation. University of Washington; 1992. Childhood psychopathology and intergenerational relations in the representation of attachment: A comparison of normal and clinic-referred disruptive preschoolers and their mothers.
- Dickstein S, Seifer R, Albus KE, Magee KD. Attachment patterns across multiple family relationships in adulthood: Associations with maternal depression. *Development and Psychopathology* 2004;16:735–751. [PubMed: 15605634]
- Eiden RD, Teti DM, Corns KM. Maternal working models of attachment, marital adjustment, and the parent-child relationship. *Child Development* 1995;66:1504–1518. [PubMed: 7555226]
- Elliston, D.; Alvarez, E.; McHale, J. An observationally based assessment of co-parental dynamics in childrearing; Paper presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association; Washington, DC. 2005 Aug.
- Feldman R, Masalha S, Nadam P. Cultural perspectives on work and family: Dual-earner Israeli Jewish and Arab families at the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Family Psychology* 2001;15:492–509. [PubMed: 11584798]
- Fivaz-Depeursinge, E.; Corboz-Warnery, A. The primary triangle: A developmental, systems view of fathers, mothers, and infants. New York: Basic Books; 1999.
- Fivaz-Depeursinge E, Favez N. Exploring triangulation in infancy: Two contrasted cases. *Family Process* 2006;45:3–18. [PubMed: 16615250]
- Fivaz-Depeursinge E, Frascarolo F, Corboz-Warnery A. Assessing the triadic alliance between mothers, fathers, and infants at play. *New Directions in Child Development* 1996;74:27–44.
- Frosch CA, Mangelsdorf SC, McHale JL. Correlates of marital behavior at 6-months post-partum. *Developmental Psychology* 1998;34:1438–1449. [PubMed: 9823523]
- Frosch CA, Mangelsdorf SC, McHale JL. Marital behavior and the security of preschooler parent attachment relationships. *Journal of Family Psychology* 2000;14:144–161. [PubMed: 10740688]
- Gable S, Belsky J, Crnic K. Coparenting during the child's second year: A descriptive account. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 1995;57:609–616.
- Gatrell C. Whose child is it anyway? The negotiation of paternal entitlements within marriage. *The Sociological Review* 2007;55:352–372.
- George, C.; Kaplan, N.; Main, M. Adult Attachment Interview. Vol. 3rd ed.. Berkeley: Department of Psychology, University of California; 1996. Unpublished manuscript
- Goodman C, Silverstein M. Grandmothers raising grandchildren: Family structure and well-being in culturally diverse families. *Gerontologist* 2002;42:676–689. [PubMed: 12351803]
- Gottman J, Markman H, Notarius C. The topography of marital conflict: A sequential analysis of verbal and nonverbal behavior. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 1977;39:461–477.
- Haley, J. Problem-solving therapy. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 1988.

- Hesse, E. The Adult Attachment Interview. In: Cassidy, J.; Shaver, P., editors. *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications*. New York: Guilford Press; 1999. p. 395-433.
- Johnson VK. Marital interaction, family organization, and differences in parenting behavior: Explaining variations across family interaction contexts. *Family Process* 2001;40:333-342. [PubMed: 11676272]
- Jouriles EN, Murphy CM, Farris AM, Smith DA, Richters JE, Waters E. Marital adjustment, parental disagreements about child rearing, and behavior problems in boys: Increasing the specificity of marital assessment. *Child Development* 1991;62:1424-1433. [PubMed: 1786725]
- Katz LF, Gottman JM. Spillover effects of marital conflict: In search of parenting and coparenting mechanisms. *New Directions for Child Development* 1996;74:57-76. [PubMed: 9308433]
- Kerr, ME.; Bowen, M. *Family evaluation*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company; 1988.
- Kobak RR, Sceery A. Attachment in late adolescence: Working models, affect regulation, and representations of self and others. *Child Development* 1988;59:135-146. [PubMed: 3342708]
- Kurrien R, Vo ED. Who's in charge? Coparenting in south and southeast Asian families. *Journal of Adult Development* 2004;11:207-219.
- Lewis JM, Owen MT, Cox M. The transition to parenthood: III. Incorporation of the child into the family. *Family Process* 1988;27:411-421. [PubMed: 3234527]
- Lindahl KM, Clements M, Markman H. Predicting marital and parent functioning in dyads and triads: A longitudinal investigation of marital processes. *Journal of Family Psychology* 1997;11:139-151.
- Locke HJ, Wallace KM. Short marital-adjustment and prediction tests: Their reliability and validity. *Marriage & Family Living* 1959;21:251-255.
- Luepnitz, DA. *The family interpreted: Feminist theory in clinical practice*. New York: Basic Books; 1988.
- Main, M.; Goldwyn, R. *Adult Attachment Scoring and Classification System*. Berkeley: University of California; 1998. Unpublished manuscript
- Main, M.; Kaplan, N.; Cassidy, J. Security in infancy, childhood, and adulthood: A move to the level of representation. Growing points of attachment theory and research. In: Bretherton, I.; Waters, E., editors. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*. Vol. 50. 1985. p. 209(1-2, Serial No. 209).
- McHale JP. Coparenting and triadic interactions during infancy: The roles of marital distress and child gender. *Developmental Psychology* 1995;31:985-996.
- McHale JP. Overt and covert parenting processes in the family. *Family Process* 1997;36:183-210. [PubMed: 9248827]
- McHale, JP. *Charting the bumpy road of coparenthood*. Washington, DC: Zero to Three Press; 2007a.
- McHale JP. When infants grow up in multiperson relationship systems. *Infant Mental Health Journal* 2007b;28:370-392.
- McHale, JP. Shared child-rearing in nuclear, fragile, and kinship family systems: Evolution, dilemmas, and promise of a coparenting framework. In: Schulz, M.; Pruett, M.; Kerig, P.; Parke, R., editors. *Strengthening couple relationships for optimal child development: Lessons from research and intervention*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association; 2009.
- McHale, J.; Berkman, J.; Kavanaugh, K.; Parmley, M.; Alberts, A. Discovery and construction: Uncovering early family-infant dynamics through the use of observational methodologies. In: Lightfoot, C.; Lyra, M., editors. *Challenges and strategies for studying human development in cultural contexts*. Rome: Carlo Amore Edizioni; 2009. p. 63-85.
- McHale J, Fivaz-Depeursinge E. Understanding triadic and family group process during infancy and early childhood. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 1999;2:107-127. [PubMed: 11225931]
- McHale J, Kazali C, Rotman T, Talbot J, Carleton M, Lieberman R. The transition to co-parenthood: Parents' prebirth expectations and early coparental adjustment at three months post-partum. *Development and Psychopathology* 2004;16:711-733. [PubMed: 15605633]
- McHale, J.; Khazan, I.; Erera, P.; Rotman, T.; DeCoursey, W.; McConnell, M. Coparenting in diverse family systems. In: Bornstein, M., editor. *Handbook of parenting*. Vol. 2nd ed.. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum; 2002. p. 75-107.

- McHale JP, Kuersten-Hogan R, Lauretti A, Rasmussen S. Parental reports of coparenting and observed coparenting behavior during the toddler period. *Journal of Family Psychology* 2000;14:220–236. [PubMed: 10870291]
- McHale J, Rao N, Krasnow A. Constructing family climates: Chinese mothers' reports of their behavior and preschoolers' adaptation. *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 2000;24:111–118.
- McHale JP, Rasmussen JL. Coparental and family group-level dynamics during infancy: Early family precursors of child and family functioning during preschool. *Developmental Psychology* 1998;10:39–59.
- McHale J, Rotman T. Is seeing believing? Expectant parents' outlooks on coparenting and later coparenting solidarity. *Infant Behavior and Development* 2007;30:63–81. [PubMed: 17292781]
- Minuchin, S. *Families and family therapy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1974.
- Paley B, Cox MJ, Burchinal MR, Payne CC. Attachment and marital functioning: Comparison of spouses with continuous-secure, earned-secure, dismissing, and preoccupied attachment stances. *Journal of Family Psychology* 1999;13:580–597.
- Paley B, Cox MJ, Harter SM, Margand NA. Adult attachment stance and spouses' marital perceptions during the transition to parenthood. *Attachment and Human Development* 2002;4:340–360. [PubMed: 12537850]
- Paley B, Cox MJ, Kanoy KW, Harter KS, Burchinal M, Margand NA. Adult attachment and marital interaction as predictors of whole family interactions during the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Family Psychology* 2005;19:420–429. [PubMed: 16221022]
- Patterson, CJ.; Chan, RW. Families headed by lesbian and gay parents. In: Lamb, ME., editor. *Parenting and child development in "nontraditional" families*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum; 1999. p. 191-219.
- Sagrestano L, Christensen A, Heavey C. Social influence techniques during marital conflict. *Personal Relationships* 1998;5:75–89.
- Schoppe-Sullivan SJ, Mangelsdorf SC, Frosch CA, McHale JL. Associations between coparenting and marital behavior from infancy to the preschool years. *Journal of Family Psychology* 2004;18:194–207. [PubMed: 14992621]
- Schuengel C, Bakermans-Kranenburg MJ, van IJzendoorn MH. Frightening maternal behavior linking unresolved loss and disorganized infant attachment. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 1999;67:54–63. [PubMed: 10028209]
- Simpson JA, Rholes WS, Orina MM, Grich J. Working models of attachment, support giving, and support seeking in a stressful situation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 2002;28:598–608.
- Snyder DK, Klein MA, Gdowski CL, Faulstich C, LaCombe J. Generalized dysfunction in clinic and nonclinic families: A comparative analysis. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 1998;16:97–109. [PubMed: 3361034]
- Strazdins LM, Galligan RF, Scannell ED. Gender and depressive symptoms: Parents' sharing of instrumental and expressive tasks when their children are young. *Journal of Family Psychology* 1997;11:222–233.
- Talbot JA, McHale JP. Individual parental adjustment moderates the relationship between marital and coparenting quality. *Journal of Adult Development* 2004;11:191–205.
- Treboux D, Crowell JA, Waters E. When "new" meets "old": Configurations of adult attachment representations and their implications for marital functioning. *Developmental Psychology* 2004;40:295–314. [PubMed: 14979768]
- Tronick EZ, Gianino A. Interactive mismatch and repair: Challenges to the coping infant. *Zero to Three* 1986;6:1–6.
- Van IJzendoorn JH. Adult attachment representations, parental responsiveness, and infant attachment: A meta-analysis on the predictive validity of the Adult Attachment Interview. *Psychological Bulletin* 1995;117:387–403. [PubMed: 7777645]
- Van IJzendoorn MH, Bakermans-Kranenburg MJ. Attachment representations in mothers, fathers, adolescents, and clinical groups: A meta-analytic search for normative data. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 1996;64:8–21. [PubMed: 8907080]
- Von Klitzing K, Simoni H, Amsler F, Burgin D. The role of the father in early family interactions. *Infant Mental Health Journal* 1999;20:222–237.

- Walker AJ, McGraw L. Who is responsible for responsible fathering? *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 2000;62:563–569.
- Weissman S, Cohen RS. The parenting alliance and adolescence. *Adolescent Psychiatry* 1985;12:24–45. [PubMed: 4003682]

FIGURE 1.

Coparenting ratings at 3 months as a function of the combination of mothers' and fathers' prebirth AAI assignments. Gray bars = cohesion, black bars = conflict, M = mother, F = father, S = secure, I = insecure.

TABLE 1

Marital and Coparenting Measures

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Marital self report			
Mother MAT	125.88	15.56	79–156
Father MAT	123.58	19.40	68–157
Observed marital interaction			
Warmth	5.55	1.86	2–9
Intimacy of communication	5.56	1.96	1–9
Autonomy	5.97	1.68	2–9
Power	6.44	1.74	2–9
Conflict	4.21	2.07	1–9
Problem solving	5.19	1.52	1–9
Postdiscussion questions (means of relevant items)			
Mother positive report on self	6.68	1.34	3.5–9
Mother negative report on self	1.96	.86	1–4.38
Mother positive report on father	6.59	1.49	3.25–9
Mother negative report on father	1.79	.83	1–5
Father positive report on self	7.00	1.32	3.13–9
Father negative report on self	1.96	.90	1–5.18
Father positive report on mother	6.87	1.42	3.25–9
Father negative report on mother	1.90	.94	1–6.13
Overall prebirth marital composite	.06	.81	–2.51–1.60
Coparenting during family interaction (LTP)			
Family warmth	3.46	.92	1–5
Coparental cooperation	3.44	.79	1–5
Coparental competition	1.93	.87	1–4
Verbal sparring between coparents	1.88	.96	1–5
Coparenting during Still Face stressor			
Coparental warmth	2.25	1.07	1–5
Coparental cooperation	2.48	1.11	1–5
Coparental competition	1.52	.83	1–5
Verbal sparring between coparents	1.20	.63	1–5
Coparenting during Who Does What			
Positive affect between partners	1.94	.96	0–3
Negative affect between partners	.60	.90	0–3
Establishment of consensus	1.85	.87	0–3
Defensiveness of mother	.65	.86	0–3
Defensiveness of father	.79	1.10	0–3
Overall coparenting cohesion composite	–.14	.61	–1.69–1.11
Overall coparenting conflict composite	–.02	.52	–.78–1.63

3-Month Coparenting Ratings as a Function of Parents' Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) Assignments

TABLE 2

3-Month Coparenting						
Parent Prebirth AAI Assignment	Cohesion			Conflict		
	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	Range	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	Range
Mother: Secure (<i>n</i> = 61)	-.12	(.68)	-1.69–1.11	-.10	(.47)	-.78–1.11
Insecure (<i>n</i> = 24)	-.20	(.47)	-1.23–.89	.18	(.60)	-.54–1.63
Father: Secure (<i>n</i> = 49)	-.03	(.60)	-1.69–1.11	.07	(.54)	-.78–1.63
Insecure (<i>n</i> = 21)	-.33	(.59)	-1.59–.89	-.17	(.47)	-.73–1.07

TABLE 3
Regressions Predicting 3-Month Coparenting from Prenatal Parental Adult-Attachment Interview Assignment (AAI) and Marital Quality

Variable	Mothers			Fathers		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Regressions predicting cohesion:						
Step 1: Marital quality	.28	.08	.36**	.27	.08	.35**
AAI assignment	.01	.14	.01	.27	.13	.22*
Step 2: Marital quality	-.27	.30	-.35	.46	.25	.61
AAI assignment	.03	.14	.02	.28	.13	.22**
Marital quality $\times$ AAI	.24	.13	.74	-.10	.12	-.27
Regressions predicting conflict:						
Step 1: Marital quality	-.03	.07	-.05	-.06	.07	-.10
AAI assignment	-.28	.13	-.24*	.24	.12	.22*
Step 2: Marital quality	-.03	.27	-.05	-.18	.23	-.28
AAI assignment	-.28	.13	-.24*	.24	.12	.22*
Marital quality $\times$ AAI	.00	.12	.00	.06	.11	.19

Note.

Regressions predicting cohesion:

Mothers: $R^2 = .13$, $p < .01$, for Step 1; $R\Delta^2 = .04$, $p < .10$, for Step 2.

Fathers: $R^2 = .18$, $p < .001$, for Step 1; $R\Delta^2 = .01$, ns , for Step 2.

Regressions predicting conflict:

Mothers: $R^2 = .06$, $p < .05$, for Step 1; $R\Delta^2 = .00$, ns , for Step 2.

Fathers: $R^2 = .06$, $p < .05$, for Step 1; $R\Delta^2 = .00$, ns , for Step 2.

* $p < .05$;

** $p < .01$.

TABLE 4

Associations Between Father Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) Assignment and Coparental Cohesion as a Function of Mother AAI Assignment

Mother AAI	Father AAI	Coparental Cohesion	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Secure	Secure	.07	.63
	Insecure	-.50	.62
Insecure	Secure	-.34	.40
	Insecure	-.03	.42