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The Meaning of the Child (MOC) is an inter-subjective interview with the parent, assessing their understanding of their child in a dyadic conversation. The interview is structured around two main axes: the risk level and the nature of the parent-child relationship. The interview is based on the Adult Attachment Interview and is designed for use with parents of children aged 1-18.

### How is the Meaning of the Child Assessed?

Interviews are classified for the level of risk and the nature of the parent-child relationship. The degree to which it is:

- **Sensitive:** mutually pleasurable to parent and child, and supportive of the child's development
- **Unresponsive:** psychologically distant from the child, leading to neglect in extreme cases
- **Controlling:** psychologically intrusive towards the child, leading to, in more serious cases, hostile and/or enmeshed relationships

The MOC is based on Attachment theory, and the classifications are linked to their effects upon the child's developing attachment pattern, and the potential risks this benefits to the child's development arising out of this.

### The Meaning of the Child Validation Study

- **Setting:** 85 parent-child dyads, of which:
  - 62 were drawn from family court proceedings, or child protection investigations (the ‘at risk’ sample)
  - 23 were normative families (US sample provided by Dr Lane Strathern, reported on in Strathern et al. 2009)
  - 56 were mothers and 26 were fathers. The fathers were all drawn from the larger, risk sample.
- **Assessments**
  - The Adult Attachment Interview (DMM-AAI, Crittenden 2007)
  - The CARE-Index with the child/infant (Crittenden, 2005)
  - The Adult Attachment Interview (DMM-AAI, Crittenden and Landini 2011)
- **Results**
  - MoC Parental Sensitivity/Risk had a significant positive correlation to Parental Sensitivity as measured by the CARE-Index (Spierman’s rho coefficient = 0.89, p < 0.0001)
  - MoC Unresponsive and Control classifications had significant positive correlations with the Care Index scales for Control and Unstressfulness in the sample as a whole (Control: r = 0.536, p = 0.000, Unstressfulness: r = 0.544, p = 0.000); and the Risk sample, but not the normative sample considered in isolation.
  - MoC Parental Sensitivity/Risk had a significant positive correlation with Parental Reflective Functioning (RF), though these were not coded blind to each other (r = 0.86, p < 0.0001).
  - The significant positive correlations between the ‘Meaning of the Child’ and the CARE-Index, and parental RF held for fathers as well as mothers. (Sensitivity: Mothers (M): r = 0.702, p = 0.000; Fathers (F): r = 0.708, p = 0.000; Unstressfulness: Mothers (M): r = 0.610, p = 0.000; F: r = 0.541, p = 0.009; Control: Mothers (M): r = 0.609, p = 0.0003).
  - The Sensitivity/Risk classification in the Meaning of the Child clearly distinguished Risk from the Normative sample (e.g. normative sample had 70% ‘functioning’ relationships, Risk 30%).

### Conclusions and Reflections

"Some children ... had acquired an understanding of their parents at a very young age, but at the same time they had learned to live with the reality that their parents did not have the capacity to provide the love and support they needed. The children's lives were seriously disturbed by their parents' inability to provide them with the emotional and psychological support they needed to develop as healthy, independent individuals.

The Meaning of the Child offers a systemic, inter-subjective approach to classifying parenting representations. As such it is alive to the dynamic, interactive nature of the parent-child relationship for both parent and child, in addition to the influence of the parent’s child-rearing experiences. The Meaning of the Child coding system integrates Crittenden’s DMM understanding of self-protective information processing (Crittenden & Landini 2011) with a dyadic approach to the ‘co-construction’ of attachment.

In doing so it is able to differentiate between different functioning ‘at risk’ relationships, rather than lump all these together in one category linked to ‘disordered attachment’. This extends it to clinical and forensic usefulness.

The Meaning of the Child has been developed to assess fathers as well as mothers, and both are included in the validation study.

### References

- Fonagy, P., J., Fonagy, P., J., & Target, M. (2005). ‘The development of the Meaning of the Child Interview was carried out as part of doctoral research conducted at the University of Roehampton, and the author is grateful for the support of Dr Steve Waddington. The Meaning of the Child is also taught as part of the University’s MSc in Attachment studies."
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