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Mental Representation and Change: Developing Attachment Relationships in an Adoption Context

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This article presents an attachment theory and research-based perspective on the utility of assessing qualities of mental representations as indexes of change in an adoption context. The article reviews findings from a large, longitudinal and intergenerational study of attachment relationships of previously maltreated children who were adopted in latency. An attachment perspective provides a secure base from which to explore how old objects were carried into these new relationships, by both adoptive parents and the children recently placed with them. The study has the potential to inform a wider area of interest, namely to add to our knowledge base concerning the assessment of mental representations in both children and adults. The possibility to provide empirical evidence for intergenerational links and changes in representations over time in relation to a new environment is helpful, especially if we can chart relationships that can facilitate or inhibit the emergence of trust, growth, and the development of corresponding representations.

The following quote is from a mother describing a significant shift in her newly adopted six-year-old son's representation of the developing attachment relationship with his (new) mother. Initially, her son seemed only able to express hostility toward her, and rejection of his new family. A few months into the establishment of their relationship, more positive features began to emerge. Her capacity to recognize the shift, no doubt, helped facilitate it.

> And then the other day at breakfast he says to me, "Mum, of all of the children in all the world, you chose me, didn't you?" I said "Absolutely." Which is lovely. So as well as him having to cope with this realization of his having been rejected, he's beginning to realize that there was some choosing involved, as well. He's only just beginning to get his head round this.

One of the most motivating features of our work as clinicians and developmentalists is the opportunity to witness change. Change is written about extensively in the literature covering both descriptions of theoretical innovation and treatment intervention. Yet, many clinicians do not often have the opportunity to demonstrate specific qualities of change via empirical assessment. The map is shifting with increasing use of narrative-based measures, specifically designed to elucidate important areas of functioning, including defensive processes and affect-laden verbal and nonverbal reflections of experience. Studies involving repeat-administrations of these narrative-based

assessments afford the possibility of ascertaining changes in the internal world of respondents in both qualitative and quantitative modalities.

This article draws on systematic findings obtained in a study of newly adopted school-aged children and their parents. The study provides a chance to watch as change takes place in the internal and external worlds of a sample of previously maltreated children. The specific domain of the adoption of the older child involves, as a central feature, the shift from the experience of multiple caregiving situations to a permanent placement. This provides the opportunity to witness, from the beginning, the developing attachment relationships between adoptive parents and their newly placed children. An attachment perspective provides a secure base from which to explore how old objects were carried into these new relationships, by both adoptive parents and the children just placed with them. The study has the potential to inform a wider area of interest, namely to add to our knowledge base concerning the assessment of mental representations in both children and adults. The possibility to provide empirical evidence for intergenerational links and changes in representations over time in relation to a new environment is helpful, especially if we can chart relationships that can facilitate or inhibit the emergence of trust, growth, and the development of corresponding representations.

MENTAL REPRESENTATIONS AND THE OBJECT WORLD

The concept of mental representations is an essential constant in the psychoanalytic literature from Freud's earliest writings through the present day. Reference to the long-term influence upon personality and social functioning of the child's early (mental) model of his relationship to mother is prominently mentioned and widely cited in *The Outline of Psychoanalysis* (Freud, 1940). Thinking about object relationships, their links to inner mental representations, and developmental processes, has continued apace throughout the decades (e.g., Jacobson, 1954; Sandler and Rosenblatt, 1962; Mahler, Pine, and Bergman, 1975; Emde, 1983; 2007; Fonagy et al., 2002). Importantly, by the 1980s, developmental research had, in some sense, caught up with psychoanalytic theory via the expanding influence of attachment theory (Eagle, 1984, 2003; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985, Silverman, 1998; Slade, 1999) and a broadening emphasis within psychoanalytic thought upon the relational structure of mind underpinning self development (Kernberg, 1984; Stern, 1985; Holmes, 1996; Stern, 2002).

Important differences exist between attachment theory and other psychoanalytic theories, mainly with respect to the relative emphasis given to intrapsychic interactions, and differing assumptions about basic motivational forces underlying development. Bowlby's (1969, 1980) focus on actual interactions between parent and infant, and the jettisoning of drive theory by Bowlby in favor of an ethologically informed control systems view of human motivation, led many psychoanalysts of his time to question Bowlby's status as an analyst. Bowlby, instead, chose to bring analytic ideas to a wider audience, invigorating developmental research with a testable theory, and delivering to psychoanalysis an empirical demonstration of Freudian assumptions concerning the powerful long-term influences of early relationship experiences (Steele and Steele, 1998). Vital to attachment theory, and other psychoanalytic theories, is the conviction that we are guided by prototypes (introjects) of our earliest relationships, or *internal working models*, which shape our expectations of self and other and, therefore, our behavior.

Bowlby (1969) incorporated from Piagetian cognitive psychology the term *internal working model* to refer to the process by which children arrive at internal representations of their emotional

experiences and significant relationships. The internal working model concept, and its meaning-making capacities, has been extended (see Bretherton and Muholland, 1999) to show that lived experiences are represented at various levels of specificity within the mind, serving as guides to perception of the self and others, including rules for how to interpret negative emotions and engage in behavioral strategies for managing these. This idea of an internal working model of self and attachment figure(s) that organize thoughts and feelings regarding relationships and guides expectations regarding the nature of future interactions, arose out of a fruitful synthesis between classical psychoanalytic thinking and cognitive psychology. Bowlby pointed directly to the notion that we each carry within ourselves a representation of the self and other, and the self in metaphorical conversation with the other. The challenge for adults interacting with children, whether they be natural parents, adoptive parents, teachers, or child clinicians, is to recognize that these mental representations have developed out of many interactions the child has had often with a range of caretakers, influencing internal and external domains and levels of functioning. Erratic, chaotic, irrational behavior follows from the internalization of erratic, chaotic, irrational, and often aggression- tinged parenting.

Bowlby's (1980) notion of internal working models of attachment belongs to the realm of unconscious mental structure. It is important to keep in mind the function these internal models are thought to serve. Perhaps the most important of these is to regulate the individual's experience of intense emotion and, in turn, to direct the individual's behavioral and psychological responses. Although internal models are conceived of as being resistant to change in the adult, they are thought to take shape gradually during the first years of life. Investigations of the development of mental representation suggest the building blocks of these models to be salient emotional events and interactions with caregivers. Internal working models of self and attachment figures are likely to compose a hierarchical network of mental representations. Daniel Stern's (1985) formulations about the building blocks of mental representations are highly relevant here. The child experiences *events* for example, falling down with a caregiver responding in a given way (for example, helping the child up) comprising an interaction likely to be repeated (given that the adult's mental world is more or less stable). This leads, in the preverbal infant's mind, according to Stern (1985) to representations of interactions that are generalized (RIGS). These RIGS would seem to belong to an intermediate position in the proposed hierarchy of mental experience that exists in the preverbal emotional constructs that will only months (and years) later be reformatted into verbally organized constructs. Putting these constructs alongside one another serves to emphasise the affective origins of mental representations.

Collectively, these representations of interactions that carry a generalized meaning make up the initial content of the internal working model, informing one's sense of self, others, what to expect, and how to behave, particularly when distressed, that is, when the attachment system is activated. The internal working model of attachment may be seen as the blueprint for survival, knowing if and to whom you can turn when upset, and whether and how to approach. Security of attachment may be reflected in the extent to which this blueprint provides a sufficiently detailed and serviceable map that guides behavior across the full range of circumstances encountered by the child and, over time, with modifications to the map as a function of experience, this internal model will come to characterize core aspects of the adult personality. This serviceable quality refers, in part, to the flexibility that mental representations or internal working models within individuals classified as *secure* appear to have. These serviceable secure models have been linked to mental health in both cross-sectional and longitudinal research, yet rigid and inflexible qualities thought to be typical of

the internal working models of individuals classified as *insecure* or *disorganized* are associated with psychopathology (van IJzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2008).

Bowlby was emphatic that although these internal working models, once formed, are resistant to change, revision and further development is possible throughout one's life as one enters new experiences. In this context, for a young child the move into an adoptive placement represents a most radical intervention, the establishment of a freshly drawn map, involving the child in an entirely new set of experiences. However, Bowlby (1973) gave expression to the challenge faced by these children and the mothers who adopt them:

> Once a sequence of behaviour has become organized, it tends to persist and does so even if it has developed on non-functional lines and even in the absence of the external stimuli and/or the internal conditions on which it first depended. The precise form that any particular piece of behaviour takes and the sequence within which it is first organized are thus of the greatest consequence for its future [p. 201].

Identifying *how* and *what* might change as a result of the dramatic shift from less than optimal caregiving arrangements to more favorable ones is of paramount importance if we are to draw conclusions for improvements in social policy as concerns the selection, preparation, training, and ongoing support of foster carers and adoptive parents. Distinct from the range of parenting skills brought to the task of caregiving by foster and adoptive parents are the range of skills, experiences, and disturbances carried by children themselves from their previous home(s). Particularly older adoptive placements typically follow a long period of being *in transition* (multiple foster placements), such that as the children are waiting for the permanent caregiving arrangement, they find themselves on a trajectory that carries them further from typical development, often exacerbating their previous history of adversity. They all have in common experiences of having lost birth parents or having been abandoned and, in most cases of older domestic adoptions, histories of neglect, physical, emotional, and, sometimes, sexual abuse. These deleterious experiences obviously make them more vulnerable to negative outcomes in terms of their mental health and psychological functioning. The overrepresentation of adopted children in mental health and special educational services is reflected in lower levels of school achievement and self esteem, higher rates of externalizing and internalizing behavior problems in childhood and adolescence (Verhulst, Althaus, and Verluis-den Bieman, 1992; Juffer and van IJzendoorn, 2005).

In terms of dynamic features of the internal worlds of these traumatized children, clinicians have noticed strong tendencies not seen in the same form or to the same extent in matched comparison groups. These proclivities include magical or omnipotent thinking, identification with the aggressor, high levels of aggressive themes in play, sexualized play and behavior, role reversal or parentification, and rage and hate towards attachment figures, past, present, and imagined. British child analyst Margaret Rustin (2006) has pointed to unique features of these children's experience:

> The helplessness to influence events that many such children have felt arises from the experience of being moved from family to family and place to place in what were often bewildering, incomprehensible or frightening circumstances. Instead of the unconscious family romance fantasy that Freud described (Freud, 1909), adopted children have the strange experience of this fantasy becoming real: they are not left to dream of "really" belonging to other more desirable parents, but actually find themselves in a new family which is presented to them as a vast improvement on their previous experience [p. 109].

For late adopted children, as Hodges (1990) commented upon, the romance family yearned for is often an idealized image of the birth parents from whom they have been separated and never knew from direct experience. Thus, consistent with psychoanalytic theory in the broadest sense, powerful and highly compelling mental representations may arise from wished-for interactions. Similarly, Herzog (2001) has commented that children who grow up with an absent father nonetheless have a paternal representation including a deep longing or 'hunger' (regarding the wished for internal object). An understanding of this dynamic is crucial for the foster or adoptive parent, who is likely to be fiercely hated at times as a poor substitute for, and a barrier to, the child obtaining the wished for romance family. Following these processes in adopted children may be usefully undertaken from a psychoanalytically informed attachment perspective, with its core interest in the impact of separation. Specifically, the focus on the development of parent–child relationships and their potential influence on the development of the self and ongoing interactions, in terms of mental representations stemming from past interactions and wished-for interactions is of paramount interest.

THE ATTACHMENT REPRESENTATIONS
AND ADOPTION OUTCOME STUDY[1]

The study was designed and implemented by Miriam Steele (Anna Freud Centre), Jeanne Kaniuk (Coram Family), and Jill Hodges (Great Ormond Street), the focus being on the process of the developing attachment relationships between previously maltreated children and their new adoptive parents. One of the goals was to highlight the expectations, fantasies, and hopes that each member of the parent–child dyad brings to their new and developing attachment relationship. This study uniquely addressed changes within the child's internal world, as contrasted to the growing literature on more easily measured external features such as the remarkable "catch up" in terms of head circumference and cognitive functioning following past global deprivation (Rutter & ERA Research Team,1998; van IJzendoorn et al., 2006). The study was unique in its adherence to utilizing interview-based narrative assessments with both the children and the adults in the study, in order to capture features of their mental representations having to do with attachment.

The longitudinal design afforded the study of psychological adaptation in the children studied in diverse ways with respect to both representational aspects of their attachment relationships, but also to their observed behavior in relation to one another (Steele et al., 2003; Hodges et al., 2005). By incorporating both interview assessments and careful coding of observational video filmed assessments, different facets of the parents and child's representational world could be assessed. The hallmark of the assessment of the adoptive parents was the gold standard measure of attachment processes in adults, the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; Main et al., 1985), which was administered to both prospective adoptive mothers and fathers before the child/children was placed with them. Notably, the AAI was not part of the materials relied upon to approve the adults as adopters. Then, within three months of placement, the mothers were administered the Parent Development Interview (Aber et al., 1985), aimed at tapping into parental representations of the child. Several questionnaire measures were also completed by the adoptive parents, covering aspects of child be-

havior problems and indexes of parenting stress.[2] The study's longitudinal design, meaning that the families were followed from the time of the child's placement, to one and two years later, was an integral feature of being able to observe change over time.

Qualities of the children's attachment representations were assessed using the Story Stem Assessment Profile (Hodges et al., 2002). This measure of both verbal and nonverbal behavior is aimed at elucidating specific, attachment-relevant aspects of the child's internal world, including representations of self and other as secure, or aggressive and/or disorganized themes, or with narrative responses with a preponderance of defensive maneuvres, seemingly aimed at reducing experienced anxiety in relation to the conflict presented by the story stem protocol. The study includes a comparison group of domestically adopted children placed in the first year of life but now 4–8 years of age in contrast with the late-adopted target group, that afforded the possibility of comparing children for whom there was also an adoption aspect, but for whom the level of previous adversity was considerably less both in terms of amount of time and intensity.

Sample

The main target sample consisted of 58 children who were "late placed," between the ages of 4 and 8 years. These 58 children were adopted by 41 mothers, 25 of whom adopted one child, 15 of whom adopted sibling pairs, and one who adopted a trio of siblings. The children ranged in age from 4 to 8 years, with a mean of 6 years. Forty-three percent of the sample of children was comprised of boys and 85% were Anglo-European. A global tally for type and severity of abusive experiences yielded an index with a range from 2–5, where the mean was 3.2 ($SD = 0.7$), indicating that all children had experienced at least two or more of the following types of abuse: physical, sexual, or severe neglect. The number of carers they had experienced ranged from two to 18 different placements ($M = 5.2$, $SD = 2.8$). Five children were placed with single adopters, and the rest were placed within the context of a married couple. The mean age of the mothers was 40 years. Findings from this study have been published previously (Hodges et al., 2003; Steele et al., 2003; Hodges et al., 2005; Steele et al., 2008).

The AAI

The AAI is structured entirely around the topic of attachment, principally the individual's relationship to mother and father (and/or to alternative caregivers) during childhood. Interviewees are asked both to describe their relationship with their parents during childhood, and to provide specific memories to support global evaluations. The interviewer asks directly about childhood experiences of rejection, being upset, ill, and hurt, as well as about loss, abuse, and separations. In addition, subjects are asked to offer explanations for their parents' behavior, and to describe the current relationship with their parents, as well as the influence they consider their childhood experiences to have had upon their adult personality.

Adult patterns of attachment, identifiable in spoken (recorded and transcribed) responses to the AAI, refer to different strategies adults rely on when faced with the task of making sense of their childhood relations with parents or caregivers. The signal features of the secure-autonomous strat-

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[2]Questionnaires included the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, & Edelbrook, 1983), The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997), and the Parenting Stress Index (Abidin, 1983).

egy are coherence and a strong valuing of attachment. In rating the interview's coherence, special attention is paid to the level of discrepancy between the global description of the parents in relation to the question that arises early in the interview, which is to provide five adjectives to describe one's early relationship to mother, followed by the question to do the same for father. These descriptions are noted as conveying the semantic quality of one's mental representation. The subject is then asked to explain why he or she chose those particular adjectives by providing specific incidents or memories. Other interview questions also tap into the interviewees capacity to retrieve "episodic" memories that allow for the important contrast between the overarching global or semantic organization alongside the semantic and episodic. Discrepancies between these two forms of memory are central to the rating of the interview transcripts quality of coherence, which is a critical feature to assigning an overall classification. From the realm of adult psychotherapy, Frankel (2002) suggests that discussion of the pathological consequences of the divergence of the episodic imagistic) and semantic (narrative) memory systems point to the possibility that discrepancies between one's personal experience and one's beliefs about oneself and the world can be seen as a measure of psychopathology.

Secure interviews are reflected by open, nondefensive mental operations regarding attachment-related experiences. This is important as we consider the link between assessments of attachment, including the AAI and mental representations, and how the potential for change may be facilitated by engagement with a secure mind, either of a parent or a therapist. The following is an excerpt from an interview collected from one of the mothers in the sample under study. The preplacement AAI was ultimately classified secure-autonomous, with evidence for this judgment contained in speech like the fresh, coherent, and genuine fragment below in which references to autonomy and agency, typical in secure interviews, are italicized:

> *I* can remember being quite cautious about *my* approach to her and so *I* can give you an example when we were on holiday, *I* was really little, and *I* said *I* wanted to go on a swing with someone, and she thought I wanted to go for a swim, and told *me* not to be stupid it was about 7 o'clock at night (*laugh*) and *I* remember feeling quite sort of like you do as an child sort of you're feeling a bit silly (*mm*) that she thought *I* was asking something ridiculous when actually *I* was asking something quite reasonable, and there was a misunderstanding and *I* felt embarrassed in fact *(mm)* so *I* was cautious, *I* mean *I* was cautious not to have that kind of thing happen (*mm*) cause *I* think she made *me* feel quite small sometimes *(mm)* so in that sense *I* was cautious.

The dismissing and preoccupied patterns each represent different forms of insecurity arising out of negative attachment experiences that appear to not have been integrated evenly into the adult's sense of self. The dismissing strategy leads to an incoherent narrative characterized by global statements about a good or normal childhood that cannot be supported by relevant memories. Or, as in the case of the following example, a rather emotional stance toward attachment best captured by the word *derogation*:

> Um, no {subject laughs} not really, no. Er, my great-grandmother died. Grandma, no grandpa's mother but she was, she died when I was ten and I was, I was sitting my exams and literally, I mean I was doing the exam and I came out of the exam the principal said "Your great-grandma's died" but I was ten (*hmm*) and she was my grandma and she was old. I mean I knew she was very old (*hmm*) but she was 80-something {subject laughs}, I mean, she was, she'd been shrinking {subject laughs}. My, my mum's family shrink as they get older, my dad's family grow {both laugh}. But, and she was tiny

> {subject laughs}. I mean, I was way taller than her when I was ten and, um, so that, that, that, so it wasn't really—a loss. *(Hmm).* I mean, even pets die."

The preoccupied strategy leads to an incoherent narrative characterized by global statements about a difficult childhood that are accompanied by an overabundance of memories and affects from childhood and adulthood, which lead the speaker to express current feelings of anger, or a sense of resignation to difficulties that cannot be overcome.

Finally, the unresolved pattern, which may be present in an otherwise dismissing, preoccupied, or autonomous interview, is evident when an adult shows signs of ongoing grief and disorientation concerning some past loss or trauma. Narratives that are assigned a classification of *unresolved* with respect to loss and/or trauma include an excessive attention to detail when discussing loss, delayed bereavement reactions, slips in the monitoring of speech, and incoherent contradictions, for example, speaking of the dead person as if still alive, or failing to notice and correct multiple different ways of retelling a traumatic event. The following is an example of a narrative response that was classified as *unresolved* with regard to loss. The interviewer's question "Can you tell me about any losses that you may have suffered since childhood?" was responded to as follows:

> Oh, well, really only my Mum, which was a terrible blow, because I'd never known her to be ill for even a day but that was really heartbreaking because it was so nasty and so unpleasant. It started off with what she thought was laryngitis that she'd got from a friend who I'd introduced her to so I feel responsible and then it just got worse, and then when they said it was nodule or something. She wasn't young but she's able to run down to Safeway quicker than I can which is really not fair.

The significant features that merit this narrative's inclusion in the unresolved group are the speaker's ideas that she was somehow responsible for her mother's illness because she had introduced her to a friend from whom she picked up an illness. Second, there is a slip of the tongue in which she refers to her mother as if she were still alive, that she is able to run to the shop quicker than the subject, which, as we know, is not possible for someone dead to do!

The Power of the AAI

The intergenerational findings (Main et al., 1985; van IJzendoorn, 1995; Steele, Steele, and Fonagy, 1996) linking the AAI to infant–parent patterns of attachment are also highly compelling because of the sheer weight of the statistical association linking individual differences in infant behavior to identifiable differences in parental states of mind about attachment. This is remarkable, given that the link between observed maternal sensitivity (parental behavior) and infant–parent attachment, in multiple studies, is considerably weaker and about half as strong, at best (van IJzendoorn, 1995). In other words, a measure of parents' thoughts and feelings about the past predicts the present status of the parent–child relationship *better* than current observations of the parent with the child.

In the current study, for the 41 mothers, AAI data were available from 40 (one mother of a pair of siblings was not interviewed). Twenty-nine (73%) of the mothers' interviews were judged secure, nine (23%) were judged insecure-dismissing, and 2 (5%) were judged insecure-preoccupied. Of the 40 interviews, 8 (20%) were judged unresolved with respect to past loss or trauma. These eight unresolved interviews were otherwise classified dismissing in four cases, autonomous-secure in two cases, and preoccupied in two cases. This distribution of secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and unresolved mothers is in line with samples of nonclinical populations (Bakermans-

Kranenberg and van IJzendoorn, 2009; van IJzendoorn, 1995), although our sample of well-vetted adopters showed a higher proportion of interviews that were classified as autononmous-secure.

The Story Stem Assessment Profile

The core of the child assessments was the Story Stem Assessment Profile, which entails asking the children to respond to a set of story stems (see Hodges et al., 2002; Hodges et al., 2003) where the children were given the beginning of a story highlighting everyday family scenarios, each of which contains an inherent dilemma. Children were then asked "to show me and tell me what happens next?" This allows an assessment of the child's expectations and perceptions of family roles, attachments, and relationships, without asking the child direct questions about his or her own family, adoptive or biological, which might cause him or her undue conflict or anxiety. It also has the advantage for younger children of allowing both verbal and nonverbal means of communication. The latter is important, as it allows children to display or enact memories and expectations that are not part of verbally based memory, and probably date from very early in the child's experience when the enactment (for example, throwing a doll off the table) is not accompanied by words.

The stems are designed so as to elicit themes concerned with the child's expectations of relationships between parents and children. These include such areas as giving affection and setting boundaries, as well as those most central to the construct of security of attachment, namely whether the child displays an expectation that parents will be aware when children need protection or comfort, and will respond appropriately to this need. They also elicit indicators of other important aspects of the child's functioning, such as the modulation of aggression, aspects of sibling and peer relationships, and certain defensive maneuvres. The scoring of the story stems covers a range of themes from the quality and intensity of the aggression (either coherent or extreme), representations of the child and adult as endangered or endangering, realistic mastery of the conflict, and the process of responding to the narrative stem (disengagement, changing the constraints of the story). Coding the children's responses has been manualized and a training package is available for mental health professionals, of whom over 250 have, to date, been trained on the Story Stem Assessment Profile (Hodges et al., 2002).

The following are illustrations of story stem narratives that were administered to one of the children in our longitudinal study. This little boy, Larry, was 4.5 years old at the time he was first placed with his adoptive parent, at the time when the following assessment took place. The interviewer uses the doll figures to depict the story, telling the child the beginning in the way:

> For this story, the family are in the kitchen. Now, mummy and Child 1 are at the stove. Mummy is making dinner for everyone. Daddy and Child 2 are sitting at the table. Mom says, "We're going to have a really good supper but it's not quite ready yet. Don't get too close to the stove." Child says "Mmmmmmm, that looks good. I don't want to wait. I want some now." (Interviewer shows child doll leaning over and knocking the pan off the stove onto the floor). Child says, "Ow! I've burnt my hand! It hurts! Now, can you show and tell me what happens next?"
>
> C: It didn't burn— 'cause it's really (Larry then takes boy figure and headbutts him with mother doll and says) Look—he's dead.
> I: What happened about his hand? He burnt it in this story, didn't he?
> C: Let's burn *him* now.

> I: Who's putting Jack on the stove?
> C: *(Child points to mum)*
> I: Why does Mummy do that?
> C: 'Cause she's naughty too…
> I: So what happens to Jack?
> C: He gets burnt.
> I: What happened after that? Is he OK?
> C: (*nods*) It's (*the stove's*) not on…we turn it on.
> I: So what happens now to Jack?
> C: He burnt his bottom!
> I: He burnt his bottom! And what happened to him?
> C: Oh, he's OK.

What is compelling in Larry's response is that he begins with avoiding the dilemma that was introduced in the story, namely that the boy's hand was burned, telling us "it didn't burn." The story then takes an aggressive leap as he headbutts the child doll, and then even more catastrophic content comes into play as the Mother doll is shown to put the child on the stove, eventually ending in his "burnt bottom." We see that Larry is unwilling to acknowledge the distress as outlined in the story stem, and the lack of portrayal of anyone taking care of the hurt hand, for example, a parent. Instead, distress and hurt instead are met with increases in aggression.

When we fast-forward to this same boy's story completion two years later, we see an interesting shift. The interviewer delivers the "Burnt hand" story stem and asks Larry, "Can you show and tell me what happens next?"

> C: And then mummy put a Band-aid on him and then he picked it (*the pan*) back up and then mummy got hurt. So Jack went, picked it up with the same hand, and then it was cool and it was ready. And then she took the pancake out of there and put it on the table for them all to eat. Mother then tells them its ready for them.
> I: Is mum OK now?
> C: (*nods*, yes) Mum has got dinner ready.
> I: How is Jack's hand?
> C: Better.
> I: So they all eat their pancakes now, do they?
> C: Yeah.

As a six-year-old, Larry now has experienced two years with his adoptive parents, who had been independently classified as securely attached with regard to their own attachment states of mind. He quickly addresses the "hurt" in the story and has the mother put a Band-aid on the child's burnt hand. Impressively, we also see that he introduces a positive theme of what is coded in the Story Stem Assessment Profile (Hodges et al., 2002): domestic life, whereby a child describes routine events or interactions that we associate with positive or neutral happenings in family life.

The unique dataset that emanated from this adoption study has provided a large number of fascinating results, many of which may inform our understanding of early trauma on later functioning, and hold implications for a range of child practitioners, including child clinicians, social workers, and all those involved in social policy decision making. The aim of this article is not to present the full array of results but to focus only on a few of the most central findings to elucidate

the nature of positive changes that may occur in the life and mind of late-placed children with a history of profound maltreatment, when they are placed in the care of adoptive parents with positive intentions.

The late adopted, maltreated group showed more of the negative themes (avoidance and disorganization) and fewer of the positive secure themes as compared to the group of children, who were adopted within the first 12 months of their lives. The difference between the two groups, especially in terms of themes of extreme aggression and bizarre/atypical responses, did not diminish over the two-year period (Hodges et al., 2005). Although not surprising, given the degree of adversity they had faced, the many changes of caregivers and their relatively old age at time of placement, this finding was somewhat disappointing, as we had hoped that the late adopted children would catch up in terms of showing less of the negative themes after having spent two years with their new adoptive parents.

However, if we looked more carefully at the older group, we were able to demonstrate some interesting changes. First, we found that across the two years where the families were involved in the research, overall, the previously maltreated children in the late adopted group showed progressively more secure representations in their story stem narratives. This is quite remarkable. Given the degree of adversity the children faced before being placed with their adoptive families and their relatively older age at the time of the placement, the fact that they were able to integrate or internalize positive interactions into their internal world representations characterized by more positive or secure themes is, in part, testament to the powerful nature of the adoption intervention. Our understanding of the process by which these previously traumatized children were able to orient towards the day-to-day interactions that form the building blocks of the structure of representations deserves further study, perhaps as some point along the dimensions of the micro-analytic observations that have been so fruitful in the infancy studies.

Critically, we found that alongside the secure representations, there was also evidence that the negative representations (catastrophic fantasy, extreme aggression bizarre/atypical) persisted. This important finding highlights the way in which positive representations are formed presumably reflecting the more recent positive caregiving the children are receiving in their adoptive homes, whilst the negative, hard to extinguish, representations stemming from the past continue to exist alongside the development of new representations (Hodges et al., 2005). The idea that even as new, more adaptive, representations come to be formed, older ones remain was aptly described by Anne Hurry (1998) in her book on the change that can come about in the context of the psycho-analytic treatment in children: "New models of self with others built up in treatment do not obliterate old models. They are built up alongside the old: the potential activation of the old remains, particularly under conditions of stress" (p. 51). What is compelling with the results from our study is that we could track the changes in the children's mental representations, with empirical support for this critical clinical phenomenon.

The adoptive parents of late-placed children are often the first stable and organized parental presence in the children's lives. That is, given the adversity the children in this sample faced with experiences of maltreatment, at times physical and/or sexual abuse, and changes in caregiving arrangements early in their lives, the realization of a permanent placement facilitated positive changes in attachment representations that was evident over two years. This was the case regardless of the parents' attachment classifications at placement. That is, *all* the children expressed evidence of positive attachment themes (children seeking help, realistic mastery, adults showing affection, acknowledgement of distress) in their story stem assessments. These themes were in

evidence and tended to increase from each story stem assessment to the next (Hodges et al., 2003, 2005).

Given the stark shift from their pre-adoption placements, which lacked permanence, all the new adoptive placements appear to have amounted to a significant improvement, beginning with the fact that a permanent decision had been reached. Bowlby's ethological assumptions within attachment theory attest to a difficult-to-extinguish human propensity to attach, and these late-adopted children appear to have carried this capacity with them into the new placement. Other data from longitudinal studies from infancy to adulthood, where adversity characterized early development, also highlight the self-righting capacities of the human organism (Cicchetti and Rogosch, 1997).

Importantly, although a majority of children showed this increase in positive themes mentioned above, only some children showed a decrease in negative insecure themes, even within three months of placement. These children were adopted by parents whose pre-placement AAIs were statistically more likely to be classified secure-autonomous than other children, whose negative themes remained high (and were placed with parents whose AAIs were dismissing, preoccupied, or unresolved). Thus, parental states of mind, associated with open and flexible processing of affect as mentioned, were linked to children's story stem narratives with significantly fewer instances of adults appearing dead or injured, catastrophic fantasies, extreme aggression, bizarre/atypical responses, or repetition. This is compelling because it provides evidence that a parental secure attachment-facilitating capacity helps the child to modulate his or her negative affect. This resonates with Bowlby's insistence that working models of relationships must be updated and revised to accommodate to new relationships (Bowlby, 1980).

Where the parents were initially secure-autonomous, we assume they were better able to accommodate the challenging new reality of having a child with a disorganized history, prone to rejection of the new and safe home in favor of loyalty to the romance family of the (unknown) past. And for the child of such a parent, he or she was able to accommodate to the new vista opened up. Having a parent with a secure and organized secure state of mind lessens (if not removes) the need to contain within (defended against) painful emotional conflicts and memories of abuse based on the story-stem findings that we have taken to be an index of the child's inner world (Steele et al., 2003). Such a child is likely to embrace the new, safe, integrated, more hopeful reality provided by the parent, and this may gradually permit a shift from one's disorganized history. These findings highlight an important feature of how intervention, in this case the radical intervention of adoption, helps in changing the mental and emotional landscape of these highly traumatized children. As alluded to, what remains unclear is exactly what the parents with secure-autonomous AAIs are doing to facilitate these positive changes in their adopted children.

In a related study (Steele, Hodges, et al., 2007), we looked for patterns that characterized the adults and children who benefited from a brief intervention. We found three distinct patterns: (a) attachment-facilitative behaviors were evident in the adoptive parents who were able to maintain a positive emotional exchange (at the nonverbal level of facial expression) and the verbal level involving use of the child's name, reference to *we* or *us* when in interaction with their child, and reference to shared past experiences, even when the duration of their shared history was no more than a few months; (b) subtle expressions of avoidance by the parent are a potential indicator of poor attachment outcome (increasing frustration and disappointment in the parent); and (c) avoidance from maltreated children is to be expected and if it can be overridden (that is, if the parent is helped not to feel rejected), the relationship is likely to flourish (see Steele, Hodges et al., 2007).

If we take as an example the narrative of the mother cited at the beginning of this article, we may find some hints as to what contributed to the positive outcome. In describing the challenge of dealing with her son's continued rejection of her and her husband, she says the following:

> It was around the anniversary of having him with us for a year, and during this summer, he's definitely started to process everything on kind of the next level up. It was, you know, "Why am I being adopted?" "Well, my mum and dad took drugs." And now it's like, "Well, hang on a minute. What drugs did they take? Why did they take them? Did they want me to be adopted?" You know? "Why can't I see them?" "Why can't they know where I am?" And you know, we talked to him about it and we've tried to explain to him that, you know, they love him very much, but they're people who need some help and they were trying to cover up some pain that they got. And unfortunately, when you're taking drugs, sometimes the drug becomes the most important thing. It doesn't mean they don't love you. It just means they need some help.
>
> That's what we've talked through with him, but we have the experience of him being really like, he says, "I don't want to be a 'Smith.' You are not my real family." And one day, I lost it and I just said, "Look, mate," I said, "This is as real as it gets." I said, "We're here," and we aren't going anywhere. You can kick, you can shout, you can scream; I'm not going anywhere. We're in this for the long haul. We're going to go through this together. I didn't give birth to you, but I am your real family now." I said, "Sally and Frank (biological parents) will never go away. They will always be there." I said, "But we are your real family." And I said, "And when we get that piece of paper from the court" I said, "you can show it to the world," I said, "because you will be a Smith forever."

This mother's capacity to have in mind her child's anxiety and loyalty conflict with his birth parents and convey an empathic understanding of his plight is apparent. So, too, is her matter-of-fact insistence that he hear the bottom-line, that no matter what happens, she will be there for him. This mother's description of the affect-laden interaction conveys the potential for demonstrating how a parent can transmit to her adopted child vital attachment-facilitating messages that hasten both the establishment of new positive expectations, and the diminishment of old fears and unrealistic hopes. The little boy's expression of a loyalty conflict is well known in work with children in foster care and adoption. According to Juliet Hopkins (2006), "Both psychoanalysts and attachment theorists are united in giving significance to loyalty conflicts and to the subjective safety of the link to familiar internal objects, even when this may involve the repetition of negative experiences" (p. 102).

The mother quoted above shows an ability to metabolize the negative affect in his communication, see his further questioning as a move to a new level of awareness, and shows her understanding and appreciation of him and her devotion to him as parent. In doing so, she shows us something about the process by which his experience of the mother can create new and healthier representations of attachment figures. Out of her understanding, she makes the unequivocal announcement that she is mom, here and now, and for "the long haul."

What lies behind this adoptive mother's strength as a caregiver? Perhaps what she possesses are complimentary processes, involving awareness of her own and the child's mental states, divergent as they are, and the ability to envision a way forward that brings parent and child together. For the child, this stance nurtures a similar ability to integrate a range of feeling states because the new parental environment supports exploration and integrative efforts. Moreover, the adoptive parent presents an organized hopeful stance engendering, in the child, identification with a safe and constant object—perhaps for the first time. In interacting with a parent who has a well-developed capacity for mentalization, the child is likely to discover quickly that interactive errors or ruptures,

and the negative emotions that ensue, are readily alleviated and repaired, so the expectation develops that it is possible to maintain engagement with the partner in the face of strains and mismatches (Tronick, 1989).

This description highlights how the capacity to mentalize is potentially transmitted from parent to child. At the same time, it is helpful to consider, in somewhat more detail, the central role of identification in this process, as posited by Sandler (1987) who, in describing the representational world, says "Identification is one of the most important of the ego responses—the ego deals with tension with inner or outer authority by altering its self-representations to duplicate the object, and the child's feelings and behavior change accordingly" (p. 68). Although Sandler is talking of more typical situations in which the child internalizes features of the interaction and relationship with parent, there would seem to be some added value in considering the concept of identification as an important mechanism by which the traumatized child can begin to take on the more positive features of the new relationship, and if placed with a mentalizing or secure-autonomous parent, the child begins to relinquish the older, negative representations that belong to an earlier and very much more malevolent set of circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on the concept of internal working models, an adopted child with a disorganized history will enter an adoptive placement with disintegrated internal models of self and others, and a mind where fear and aggression often predominate. These models will be most amenable to revision when the new parent is available and understanding, such that this positive model gains precedence in the child's mind over the regressive pull of old, fantasied, (defensively) wished-for relationships (not based in actual experience). At the same time, the child's long impoverished model of himself will come, perhaps for the first time, to acquire the characteristics of an organized and secure self representation, capable of sustaining hope, and so diminishing the pull of negative disintegrating forces upon the mind.

The appeal of the internal working models construct is that it captures some of the best insights of the ego psychological framework that inspired Sandler in the early 1960s and some of the best insights of the relational framework that has so captured analytic thinking in the 1990s and into this century (Safran and Muran, 2000; Jaffe et al., 2001).

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