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A preliminary investigation of the use of the mini maternal behaviour Q-sort (MBQS) in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Attachment theory is an extensive yet emerging body of research which emphasises the centrality of the mother-infant bond in healthy socio-emotional and cognitive development, particularly during infancy. The last two decades in particular have seen a proliferation of attachment research involving indigenous populations in the developing world. This has also seen our understanding of the concept of 'mothering' grow in breadth and depth. However, with the increased interest in these contexts, so questions are being raised by the scientific community as to the cross-cultural reliability and validity of the findings of such research. A central point of contention surrounds the measure's suitability to the contextual and/or cultural idiosyncrasies of the sample's characteristics. Related to this are issues of construct equivalence, item and/or methodological biases, as well as theoretical discordance between Western and non-Western principles which invariably underscore such research. Debate is particularly rife in situations where the measures have been imported and 'imposed' upon the sample under study without prior, appropriate adaptation.

The mini Maternal Behaviour Q-Sort (MBQS-mini) was employed for the first time in a South African research initiative, the Ububele Mother-Baby Home Visiting Project (UMBHVP), to assess the maternal sensitivity scores of a group of mothers residing in Alexandra Township (Alex), Johannesburg. Maternal sensitivity is thought to be a key concept in the study of parent-infant interactions, and its influence on child development has been significantly correlated to the developmental outcomes of the infant. The MBQS-mini was designed and normed in Canada and is based on the notion of the 'prototypically sensitive', Canadian mother. This brings into focus some of the concerns raised above regarding the measure's appropriateness for use in a distinctly high-risk context like Alex. This research aimed to explore the coders' and trainer's experiences of the first time use and application of the measure in the Ububele research initiative in Alex. A focus group and semi-structured interview elicited important information on the participants' experiences of the training and reliability procedures and further highlighted some of the contextual/cultural constituents that were thought to have impacted the measure's overall performance and thus also its suitability, utility and applicability to a South African setting. The analysis was inductive and exploratory in nature insofar as a prescribed theoretical interest did not necessarily inform the themes that were identified. The findings indicate that despite the significant impact of the context and the possibility of further adaptation to some items, the MBQS-mini is a suitable measure with utility for assessing maternal behaviours within South Africa.