

Maternal failure: Exploring the theoretical intersections of containment and reflective functioning

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Abstract

The mother-infant dyad has a powerful impact on the child's future health and development. Integral is the mother's ability to use certain psychological tools with which to remain emotionally connected with her infant, helping him/her digest difficult emotions and experiences. However, occasional maternal failures in sustaining this connection are an inevitable and necessary part of mothering. Yet, there is very little in the existing literature that describes the mother's internal experiences in losing the connection with their infant. This article explores how attachment and object relations theory intersect when considering moments of overwhelming emotion and difficult emotional responses in mothers. This contributes to a deeper understanding of what occurs intrapsychically for mothers in those moments of maternal disconnection, dysregulation and failure, which allows us to uncover more about the nuances of containment and reflective functioning, as well as areas of similarity and divergence between these processes. The paper proposes that there are a range of positions that mothers adopt in moments of failure in response to overwhelming emotion. Undoubtedly, many mothers at times experience different kinds of reactions, and thus more research is needed to enhance our understanding of the intricate combination of internal mechanisms that mothers draw on when attempting to maintain their emotional connection with their infants.