

# Within and between effects of mothers' and fathers' attachment, mentalizing, and caregiving



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## INTRODUCTION

Parental sensitivity is crucial for children's socio-emotional and cognitive development [1]. Sensitivity is influenced by parental attachment representations (AR) and mentalizing abilities, but this has only been studied independently for mothers [2] and fathers [3]. It remains unclear how these maternal and paternal traits and skills influence **each other** and the **individual parent-child interaction**. Thus, using a family systems perspective, the present study aimed to investigate the interplay between maternal and paternal ARs and mentalizing abilities, as measured by reflective functioning (RF), on parental sensitivity.

## OBJECTIVE

How do mothers and fathers influence each other's mentalizing abilities and caregiving behaviors?

## METHODS

### Sample

N = 90 first time white middleclass mothers and fathers with N = 40 children (30% girls)

#### Age:

- M<sub>mothers</sub> = 32 years (22 - 41)
- M<sub>fathers</sub> = 33 years (21 - 52)
- M<sub>children</sub> = 6.5 month (5 - 8)

**Education:** 91% minimum A-Levels

**Household income:** 70% average or above

**AR:** 72% secure, 28% insecure

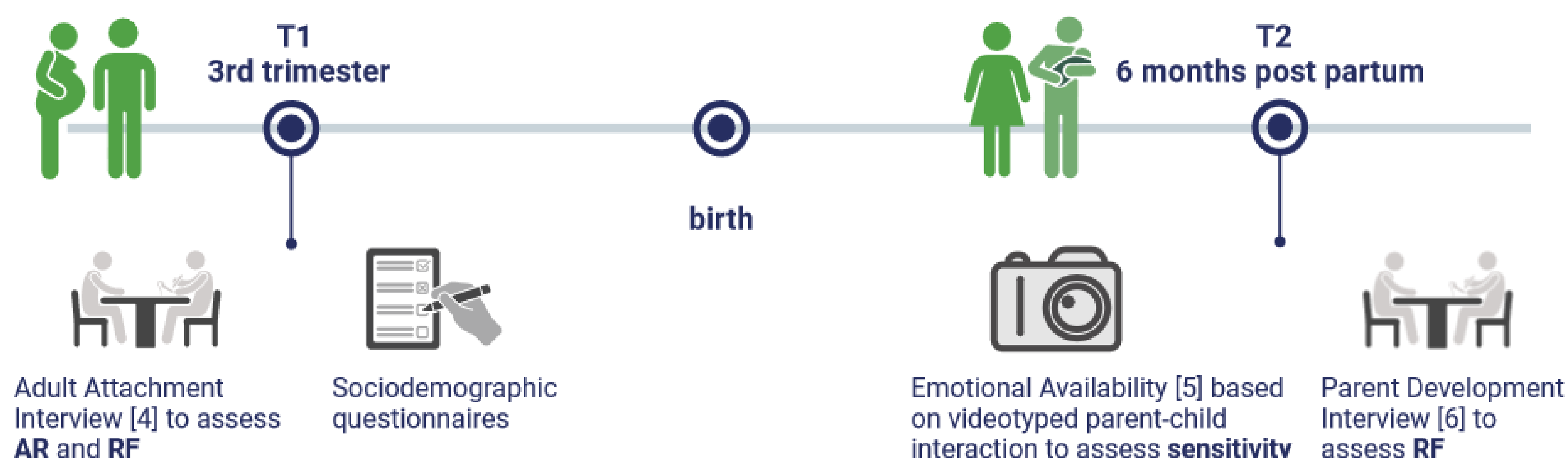


Figure 1. Schematic illustration of study design and procedures including relevant measures. Note. AR = adult attachment representations; RF = reflective functioning

## RESULTS

Analyses show associations between both caregivers' RF ( $r = .58$ ;  $p < .001$ ), as well as maternal RF and paternal sensitivity ( $r = .39$ ;  $p < .001$ ). A structural equation model including the mediation of RF on the association between each parent's AR and sensitivity, as well as mutual effects of each parent, showed good fit ( $X^2 = 15.34$ ,  $p = .571$ ; CFI = 1; RMSEA < 0.01). Individual path effects are shown in Figure 2.

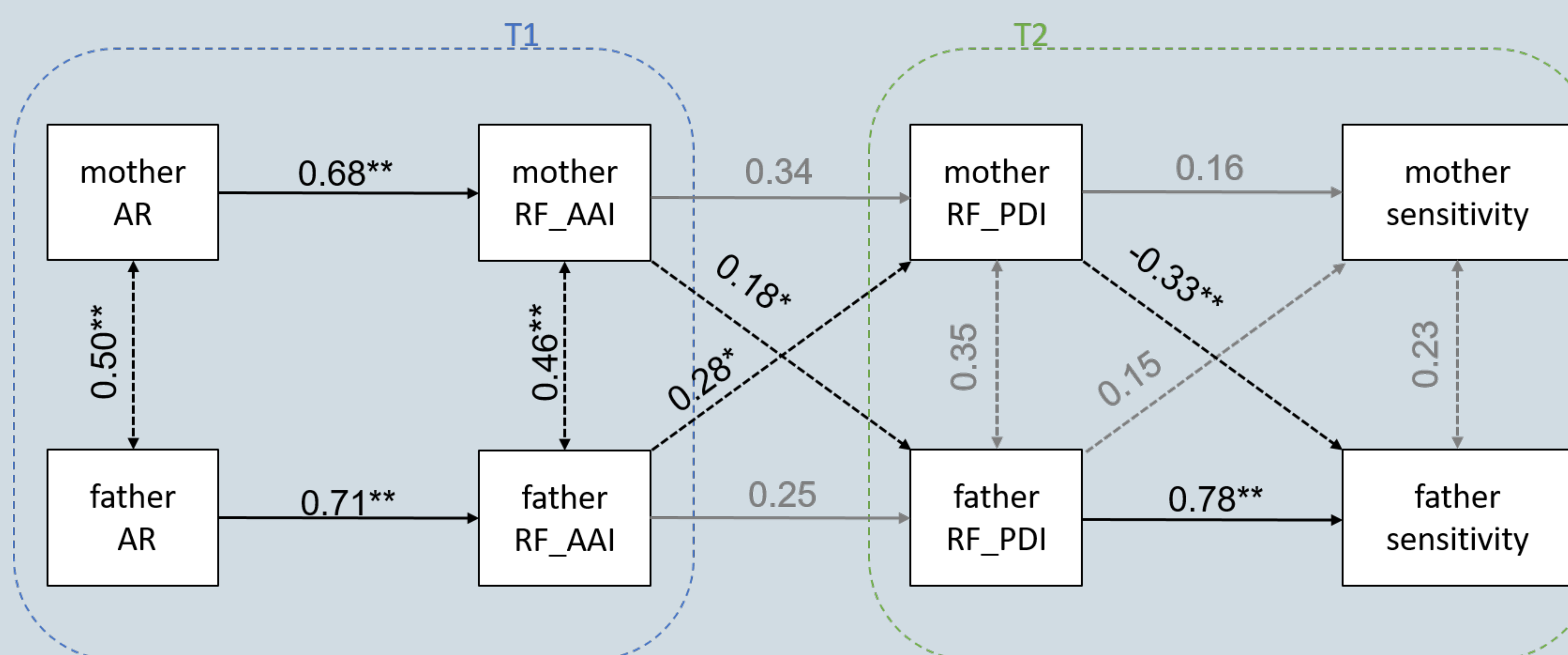


Figure 2. Actor-partner interdependence model with standardized path coefficients. Note. solid lines = actor effects; dotted lines = partner effects; AR = adult attachment representations; RF\_AAI = reflective functioning measured with the AAI; RF\_PDI = reflective functioning measured with the PDI; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .001$

## DISCUSSION

- The findings partially support the assumption of interdependencies within family systems.
- Data analysis showed that maternal prenatal RF influences paternal postnatal RF, which in turn impacts father's sensitive caregiving but not vice versa, suggesting a specific role model effect of mothers for fathers.
- Limited generalizability due to homogeneity of the sample regarding SES.
- Implications for family interventions to include both parents and to strengthen mentalizing as possible key ability for sensitive parenting.

## LITERATURE

[1] Cooke, J. E., Deneault, A. A., Devereux, C., Eirich, R., Fearon, R. P., & Madigan, S. (2022). Parental sensitivity and child behavioral problems: A meta-analytic review. *Child Development*, 93(5), 1231-1248. [2] Stacks, A. M., Muzik, M., Wong, K., Beeghly, M., Huth-Bocks, A., Irwin, J. L., & Rosenblum, K. L. (2014). Maternal reflective functioning among mothers with childhood maltreatment histories: links to sensitive parenting and infant attachment security. In *Attachment & human development*, 16(5), 515-533. [3] Dinzing, A., Ismail, S., Brisch, K. H., Sperl, W., Deneault, A. A., Nolte, T., ... & Priewasser, B. (2023). Mentalizing in first-time fathers: reflective functioning as a mediator between attachment representation and sensitivity. *Attachment & Human Development*, 25(5), 544-565. [4] George, C., Kaplan, N., & Main, M. (1985). Adult attachment interview. In *Unpublished manuscript*. University of California, Berkeley. [5] Biringen, Z. (2008). *Emotional Availability (EA) Scales Manual* (4th ed.). emotionalavailability.com. [6] Aber, J. L., Slade, A., Berger, B., Bresgi, I., & Kaplan, M. (1985). The parent development interview. In *Unpublished manuscript*.