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By Tambelli Renata & Trentini Cristina

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MATERNAL CARE IN CHILDHOOD AND NEGATIVE SELF-CONCEPT AS PREDICTORS OF THEORY OF MIND: A MEDIATIONAL MODEL

La Marca Luana (1), Iacolino Calogero (2), Guglielmucci Fanny (1), Franzoi Isabella Giulia (1), Di Dio Nancy (2), Gervasi Alessia Maria (2), Granieri Antonella (1)

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Theory suggests that the development of Theory of Mind (ToM) is linked to positive care experiences in the relationship between the child and his or her mother figure (Fonagy et al., 2002), which fosters the development of a positive view of self and other. The aim of the current study was to test this developmental model in a group of Italian adults. In this study, 779 participants (354 males, 45%) ranging in age from 18 to 60 years old ($M=35.58$, $SD=10.84$) completed questionnaires on ToM (Eyes Test), parental bonding (Parental Bonding Instrument), and attachment styles (Relationship Questionnaire). Among participants, theory of mind was positively associated with mother's care in childhood ($r=.12$, $p<.01$), and negatively associated with preoccupied ($r=-.14$, $p<.01$) and fearful ($r=-.13$, $p<.01$) attachment, which both involve a negative view of the self. Mediation analyses with gender, age, and years of education as covariates, showed that both preoccupied and fearful attachment partially mediated the positive association between mother's care and ToM. The findings of study support the developmental model proposed by Fonagy and colleagues (2002), who suggested that positive experiences in the child-caregiver relationship foster the internalization of a positive view of the self and the others, which contributes to increase mentalizing abilities. Conversely, it seems that an inadequate maternal care is linked to the development of a negative view of the self, which may decrease ToM abilities. These findings are also consistent with a life span approach to psychopathology (Bifulco et al., 2002), which suggests that the experiences of neglect and abuse in childhood damage the child's self-esteem and sense of self-worth, together with his or her ability to understand others' mental states. This damage is usually reflected in later interactions and often culminate in clinical disorders.