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RUNNING HEAD: PARENT RESPONSIVENESS

Parent Responsiveness and Future Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract

This study examines the effects that parent responsiveness may have on a child's relationship satisfaction as an adult. Participants were divided into two independent groups; those currently married (N=6) and those in a relationship and not cohabitating (N=12). Participants completed a preliminary survey, the Parental Caregiving Style Questionnaire, and the Marital Satisfaction Inventory (MSI-R). Results indicated that a responsive parenting style during childhood results in greater relationship satisfaction as an adult. This relationship was strong in regards to maternal responsiveness, ( $R^2= 0.717$ ), but not in regards to paternal responsiveness ( $R^2= -0.137$ ). These findings suggest that the quality of interactions between maternal caregivers and their children is directly related to the satisfaction the child will have in relationships as an adult.

## Introduction

Many people blame the parents for a misbehaving child. Many adolescents are believed to blame their parents for their teenage angst and personal problems. Could one possibly blame parents and upbringing for having unsatisfactory love relationships as well? It is said that the nature and quality of early experiences in the family context are generally assumed to be of importance for later social adjustment (Overbeek & Stattin, 2007). Families play a critical role in shaping attitudes and behaviours of adolescents and young adults (Bynum, 2007). For young children, the parent-child relationship is one of the primary socializing forces in their lives (Barth & Kerns 1995). A poor parent-child bond is assumed to lead to limitations in the capacity for establishing and maintaining satisfactory love relationships (Overbeek & Stattin, 2007). Family interactions can help a child develop healthy ideals of sexual curiosity, dependence and independence, aggression, achievement, motivation, sex typing, anxiety and conscience (Conger, Kagan & Mussen, 1969). Some of these traits become stable and enduring in early life, and can be predictive of future behaviours in peer and romantic relationships (Conger et al., 1969). It has not yet been explained if the caregiver-child relationship, specifically parent responsiveness, has a direct effect on the romantic relationships that the child has as an adult. The closest research to any possible direct relationship is the study of attachment styles. Attachment styles impact social relationships and are formed when the individual is an infant, but those formed in infancy are not necessarily identical to those demonstrated in adult romantic-attachment.

Parent responsiveness is a measure of how much attention a parent, or other primary caregiver, gives to an infant or child, when that infant or child needs it (Baron, Branscombe & Byrne, 2006; Feldman, Papalia & Olds, 2004; Overbeek et al, 2007). For example, this can be measured regarding how the caregiver responds to a crying infant who is hungry, or to a child

who has scraped a knee and needs comforting. Responsiveness is a key element in formation of attachment, which can be described as the degree of comfort and security an individual feels when in close relationships, and also can be explanatory of their specific thoughts and behaviours towards a relationship (Baron et al, 2007; Feldman et al, 2004; Overbeek et al, 2007).

Two basic attitudes are formed that determine the degree of security a person feels as they grow in interpersonal relationships. These two attitudes are self-esteem and interpersonal trust. They are determined by the degree of the responsiveness to the child that the parent provides. Self esteem and interpersonal trust work separately and together to form the four basic attachment styles. The most adaptive of these is the secure attachment style. Fearful avoidant, being the least adaptive, is marked by somebody whom neither desires nor functions well in close relationships, and could be the result of an unresponsive parent or caregiver. Preoccupied and dismissing are the other potentially problematic attachment styles, and are marked by a degree of uncertainty and lack of either trust in others or low self-esteem (Baron et al., 2006). Parent-offspring conflict is closely related to the concept of attachment. Disruption of the process of attachment, which contributes to the formation of attachment, can be very consequential (Suloway, 1996). If a parent is not responsive, this could influence future interpersonal relationship development in the context of peer relationships, and in turn this may have an effect on romantic relationships as the child grows into an adult.

It is known that poor parent-child bonds can lead to limitations in future relationships (Mebert & Mulvaney, 2007), but this is once again unspecific. These limitations are linked to peer relationships and perhaps this could carry over to romantic relationships. Common examples of this are temperament formation as a result of practice of parental corporal punishment, which is usually administered by spanking the child. A growing body of research

suggests there may be unintended negative consequences to this type of punishment, such as increasing children's aggressive behaviour as well as the likelihood of the child becoming delinquent, as well as increased physical aggression, antisocial behaviour, lack of moral internalization, poor parent-child relationships and diminished mental health (Feldman, Gross, Olds, & Papalia, 2004). In addition, those whom were abused in childhood show an alarming incidence of personal and social problems. Maltreatment can disturb basic patterns of attachment (Nevid & Rathus, 1992).

In adulthood, those who were punished using a form of parental corporal punishment may have more commonly expressed aggression, criminal or antisocial behaviour, anxiety disorders, depression or alcohol problems. This reflects onto romantic and marital relationships as partner or child abuse is also more frequent or worsened when the adult was spanked as a child (Feldman et al., 2004). Some victims of child abuse become abusive themselves perhaps because they grew up observing their parents use violence to cope with stress and anger. They are less likely to diffuse anger through humor, verbal expression of feelings, reasoning or other techniques (Nevid & Rathus, 1992). Exposure of violence at home may also lead some people to accept family violence as the norm, and see nothing wrong with it (Nevid & Rathus, 1992). This could mean that they carry this acceptance of violence through peer relationships and into romantic relationships. In addition to aggression, families and romantic partners experience the normal occurrence of conflict. In adolescence, the way a teen resolves conflicts with parents is related to the way parents resolve conflicts with one another. There is a transmission of conflict resolution styles from parental marital relationships to adolescent-parent relationships (Meeus & Van Doorn, 2007). This adopted conflict style can also transfer into peer relationships, and perhaps romantic relationships (Meeus & Van Doorn, 2007).

There is substantial evidence that the experiences of the child in early life have lasting and defining influences on the way he or she conducts their sexual life (Conger et al., 1969). Human sex behaviour is predominately the outcome of social learning, and thus non-hormonal factors largely determine the timing, incidence and nature of the sexual activities of males and females (Bandura & Walters, 1963). Sexual and peer relationships formed in adolescence and young adulthood can often lead to feelings of mutual love. Research has found that falling in love leads to an increase of self-efficacy and self esteem (Baron et al., 2006).

Early difficulty in the parent-child bond does affect partner relationship quality and emotional maladjustment later in life (Overbeek & Stattin, 2007). When parent-child bonds are not strong, or parents are overly strict or permissive, individuals may develop temperaments that lead them to more often engage in one or all of the "Four Horsemen" in conflict and resolution. According to Gottman (1999), the "Four Horsemen" are certain kinds of negativity that are lethal to a relationship and can lead to the end of the relationship. These include criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling (Gottman, 1999). In romantic relationships, such as a marriage, or parent-child relationships, these are often used and create negative effects (Meeus & Van Doorn, 2007).

Caregiver-child relationships are a primary socializing and developmental factor in human lives. Negative bonds at early age and into adolescence can lead to limitations in social and romantic relationships later in life (Overbeek & Stattin, 2007). This could be from poor communication with parents in the past and low-quality partner relationships in adolescence (Overbeek & Stattin, 2007). From this research, one could ask, does parent responsiveness have a direct influence on relationship satisfaction as an adult? Does this influence, if present, depend on paternal or maternal degrees of responsiveness?

## General Methods

### *Participants*

To answer these questions, a total of 20 participants were recruited from undergraduate students and the general population on a voluntary basis. Participants were either in a relationship and not cohabitating with their partner (group R, N=10), or married and cohabitating with their spouse (group M, N=10). No participants had been previously married before their relationship status at the time of the study. A committed relationship is defined as two people (one male and one female, for the purpose of this study), who have made the decision to remain in an exclusive and intimate romantic relationship with one another.

### *Measures*

*Marital Satisfaction Inventory – revised* (Snyder, 1997). The Marital Satisfaction Inventory – revised, (MSI-R) is widely used to assess the nature and extent of conflict within a marriage or relationship. The MSI-R helps couples communicate hard-to-express feelings, providing an easy, economical way to gather information about a broad range of issues. This test was chosen because of its short administration and scoring time (25 minutes), and because it is useful with both traditional and nontraditional couples. It also addresses every important aspect of the relationship. Each partner responds to 150 True-False items (129 if the couple has no children). The MSI-R consists of 13 subscales, Inconsistency (INC), Conventionalization (CNV), Global Distress (GDS), Affective Communication (AFC), Problem-Solving Communication (PSC), Aggression (AGG), Time Together (TTO), Disagreement about Finances (FIN), Sexual Dissatisfaction (SEX), Role Orientation (ROR), Family History of Distress (FAM), Dissatisfaction with Children (DSC), and Conflict over Child Rearing (CCR). Within these



scales, there is a variation of abnormal  $t$  scores derived from raw scores on each scale that indicate a possible problem or problem in that area of the relationship or marriage.

*Parental Caregiving Style Questionnaire* (Hazan & Shaver, 1986). The Parental Caregiving Style Questionnaire is an unpublished test by Cynthia Hazan. It asks basic questions about parental responsiveness with regards to mother and father figures and results indicate a parent whom is warm/responsive (1), cold/rejecting (3), or ambivalent/inconsistent (2). This test was chosen because it directly tests parent responsiveness, which is an important variable in attachment formation. The test also gives direct results which could be easily compared with other tests used in this study.

#### *Procedure*

Participants took part in this study over the course of three hours per day in a three-day period. Each participant only attended once, and completed four questionnaires in a small classroom at Algoma University. Upon entering the room, participants were instructed to remain quiet during testing, and to sit at least one seat apart from other participants. Participants were given envelopes with participant numbers on them, containing the confidentiality form, preliminary survey, Marital Satisfaction Inventory-Revised (MSI-R), Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ) and Parental Caregiving Style Questionnaire. The researcher went over each test, and instructed participants as to how to provide their responses on the answer scales, and that they need not provide their name if they do not wish. Participants were instructed to simply raise their hand if they had a question, and the researcher would provide instruction. Participants completed the preliminary survey prior to completing each measure used for testing. This was administered as a method of sorting relationship status and gathering preliminary information that may be of use in interpreting scores. Basic information made up the preliminary

survey, including gender, age, marital status, divorce, cohabitation, number of years and/or months in the current relationship, and length of time cohabitating. The Marital Satisfaction Inventory-Revised, (MSI-R) was completed following the preliminary survey. Participants responded to relationship-related questions on a true-false scale. Lastly, the Parental Caregiving Style Questionnaire was administered to participants. Participants answered statements based on mother and father responsiveness on two separate questionnaires, one pertaining to each parent. Participants are instructed to answer according to their primary male and/or female caregiver if the participant did not grow up with or have contact with their mother and/or father. After completing questionnaires, materials were gathered by the researcher and participants were invited to the Annual Undergraduate Thesis Conference at Algoma University. Participants were also asked to provide information, should they want a copy of the finished report. Participants were entered into a draw for a \$20.00 gift card from Future Shop for their participation.

#### *Statistical Analysis.*

Results from each measure will be compared within and between groups. Correlations will be done between attachment and responsiveness, attachment and relationship satisfaction and relationship satisfaction and responsiveness for both the married group and the relationship group. This will determine if those who score low on responsiveness, attachment or relationship satisfaction also score low on one or both of the other tests. T-tests will be done to find differences between those married and those in a relationship, and also amongst those who have a common score on relationship satisfaction, attachment or caregiver responsiveness.

#### *Results*

To answer the initial research question; does parent responsiveness have a direct effect on relationship satisfaction as an adult, I did a cross-tabulation to determine the frequency of

participants in satisfying relationships that also reported having responsive parents. To measure this, I looked at the number of participants that indicated having responsive parents (a score of 1 on the Parental Caregiving Style Questionnaire), as well as having a  $t$  score under 50 $t$  on the GDS scale of the MSI-R. The GDS scale measures global distress within the indicated relationship. It is the best overall indicator of dissatisfaction within one's relationship. A score of over 50 $t$  indicates being unsatisfied with one's relationship, a score of over 70 $t$  indicates severe dissatisfaction with one's relationship. This scale asks questions indicating downward comparison of the respondent's relationship in contrast to others, as well as questions indicating pessimism about the future of the relationship and overall dissatisfaction in one's relationship. Out of 18 respondents, 11 indicated having two responsive parents. Of those respondents 7 also reported having a satisfying relationship (63.64%). I used the conventional  $p < 0.05$  as criterion for judging relationships as being statistically significant. Upon doing a one-way ANOVA, this result was not statistically significant with regards to effects of both parents being responsive ( $p=0.275$ ). Figure 1.0 illustrates degree of satisfaction in respondent's relationships and the reported responsiveness of both parents. This graph depicts those participants who indicated having responsive parents (indicated by the black bars) more often fell under 50 $t$  and therefore indicated having satisfying relationships in adulthood.

When divided into maternal and paternal responsiveness, there was a significant effect of maternal responsiveness on relationship satisfaction later in life, as indicated by scores on the GDS scale of the MSI-R ( $p=0.001$ ). There was also a significant correlation between these two variables ( $R^2= 0.717$ ), this is significant at the 0.01 level and indicates a strong relationship that cannot be described strictly by chance. Figure 1.1 illustrates this linear relationship. Figure 1.2 illustrates the frequency of participants whom indicated varying levels of relationship

satisfaction in correspondence to the degree of their mother or primary female caregiver's responsiveness to them as a child. Paternal responsiveness paired with GDS indicated a nonsignificant relationship ( $p=0.588$ ). There was also a negative nonsignificant correlation between these two variables ( $R^2 = -0.137$ ), indicating that paternal responsiveness may not be an adequate predictor of relationship satisfaction as an adult. Figure 1.3 illustrates this linear relationship. Figure 1.4 illustrates the frequency of participants whom indicated varying levels of relationship satisfaction in correspondence to the degree of their father or primary male caregiver's responsiveness to them as a child.

Between groups, overall responsive parents were reported for all individuals in the married group ( $N=6$ , 100%). In addition, 50% of married participants indicated more overall dissatisfaction with their relationship, indicated by  $GDS > 50t$ . Of those in a non-cohabitating relationship, only 41.6% reported overall dissatisfaction with their relationship, indicated by  $GDS > 50t$ . Paired t-tests indicated a nonsignificant effect of gender on parental responsiveness for maternal responsiveness ( $p= 0.381$ ), or paternal responsiveness ( $p= 0.790$ ). In addition, regression tests also indicated that neither parents were more responsive to either females or males ( $R^2$  Paternal = 0.07;  $R^2$  Maternal = 0.01).

### Discussion

It seems that parent responsiveness has a nonsignificant effect on future relationship satisfaction in adults; however there is a trend towards this relationship when one looks at the raw data. Maternal responsiveness, on the other hand is a good predictor of future relationship satisfaction in adult children. These results indicate that a child with a responsive mother is more likely to have satisfying love relationships as an adult. In addition, an adult who experienced a cold or ambivalent mother as a child is least likely to have satisfying romantic relationships as an

adult. This could be due to maternal care having an overall great impact on rearing children, or that maternal care may have a greater effect on development of relationship schemas. Responsive mothers may somehow influence their adult children to better select romantic partners, and end relationships once they become troubled or unsatisfactory. Paternal responsiveness, in contrast, has little to no effect on future relationship satisfaction as an adult. It seems that the degree of responsiveness a father shows to his child, though important, does not influence relationship satisfaction in that child as an adult. According to this study, it does not matter how responsive or unresponsive a father is, the child is at little risk for entering into unsatisfactory love relationships as an adult. From an evolutionary perspective, this makes sense. While male humans were fathers to many children, females can only carry and care for a few children at a time. The children, not seeing or perhaps even being aware of who their father was, were naturally more likely to be receptive to the responsiveness of the mother. Because of this, maternal responsiveness had a greater effect on the child than paternal responsiveness. In today's society, children may still carry that attribute to perhaps be less attentive to an unresponsive or ambivalent father.

Gender differences had no effect in this study. Males and females did not significantly experience greater relationship satisfaction either way. In addition, there were no gender differences with regards to responsiveness. While one may think that fathers are generally more responsive to male children, and mothers to female children, this was not the case. In addition, it was not the case that mothers and fathers were jointly more responsive to either gender of child. This may be due to small sample size, or perhaps there is no difference in responsiveness to a child's gender when it comes to maternal or paternal care.

Married participants experienced more dissatisfaction overall in their relationships, even though in all cases both parents were responsive. This could be due to the fact that the married group was also the *cohabitation* group, while those participants in a relationship were not cohabitating. This confounding variable of cohabitation may have skewed these results. In addition, when one looks at the logistics behind this finding, it is much easier to leave a relationship once one is unsatisfied with it, while it is difficult to leave a marriage if this is the case. In a marriage, couples more often endure and try to work through problems, and this is not always the case in non-cohabitating couples just in a committed relationship. This is another factor which may have affected these results in this study.

#### *Attachment Theory*

Attachment theory indicates that parent's responsiveness towards the child builds self esteem and interpersonal trust. An unresponsive or ambivalent parent would result in attachment that is not secure, but is avoidant, dismissing or preoccupied. In turn, responsive parenting is said to result in a securely attached child, with high self esteem and interpersonal trust. According to Hazan and Shaver (1988), this theory carries over to romantic relationships, and influences the type of romantic relationship the individual enters into and remains in as an adult. Could attachment theory need updating? Responsive parenting is important for developing key attitudes and healthy behaviours in children (Baron, Branscombe, & Byrne, 2006), but this may not be the case. Previous studies (Hazan & Kobak, 1991; Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998; Burchinal, Cox, Paley & Payne, 1999; Berscheid, Collins & Reis, 2000; Sakamoto & Takahashi, 2000; Collins & Linder, 2005; Conger, Donnellan & Larsen-Rife, 2005; Overbeek & Stattin, 2007) have made inferences and explored the parent-child relationship, attachment and romantic and other interpersonal relationships humans have outside of family, and any links or connections between

them. Many inferences in these studies explore how parent-child relationships affect peer relationship development, which in turn affects romantic relationship development (Overbeek et. al., 2007), but none have drawn direct connections between the *root* of attachment (parent responsiveness) and adult relationship quality. According to this study, the root cause of attachment, parental responsiveness, may not have any effect on relationship satisfaction as an adult. These results were, however, statistically significant for maternal care ( $p=0.001$ ). It may, therefore, be the case that attachment styles influencing adult relationships may be the responsibility of the mother, or primary female caregiver. According to this research, if the mother is responsive, which according to attachment theory forms the secure attachment style, then the child is likely to experience satisfactory relationships as an adult. This finding confirms attachment theory for child and relationship development with regards to maternal care only. One must keep in mind as well, that results were nonsignificant for *both* parents together, but significant for maternal care.

### *Parent-Child Interactions*

The parent-child relationship is a primary socializing factor in a child's life (Feldman, Gross, Olds & Papalia, 2004). Variations in parenting styles, such as emotional affect or communication (Meeus & Van Doorn, 2007) can render different effects on children. One specific parental attitude, parent responsiveness, is said to be the rooted in attachment style formation, by influencing development of self-esteem and interpersonal trust in children at an early age. While previous studies (Hazan et. al., 1991; Bartholomew et. al., 1998; Burchinal, et. al., 1999; Berscheid, et. al., 2000; Sakamoto et. al., 2000; Collins et. al., 2005; Conger, et. al., 2005; Overbeek et. al., 2007) have explored effects of parenting on interpersonal relationships children have as adults, but none have studied the direct effects of responsiveness on future

romantic relationships. This study shows that maternal care in the form of maternal responsiveness has a direct effect on future relationship satisfaction in children as adults.

### *Applications*

This study is important in that it clears up misconceptions about attachment theory assumptions, and questions its validity. If the root influence of attachment does not effect relationship satisfaction in the individuals in question as adults, could we say that attachment may not have any effect on perceived relationship quality at all? Individuals now can know that the degree to which parents are responsive to them as children is no excuse for their having unsatisfactory relationship experiences. In addition, the significance of maternal care actually having an effect on it's own is evidence enough for potential mothers to ensure that they are responsive to their children, as failure to do so may result in their children growing up to have unsatisfactory love relationships in adulthood. From this study more questions can be asked, such as why would married couples experience more dissatisfaction in their marriage than those in a committed relationship and not cohabitating? In addition, one could ask why paternal responsiveness would not have a significant effect on future relationship satisfaction in adult children, while maternal care does. Also, is attachment theory out of date? Is attachment theory wrong? How could responsiveness prove to have no effect on future relationship satisfaction, when it is the root of attachment, which claims to affect relationships? These are a few questions raised by this research that I look forward to being explored by others in the near future.



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Figure Captions

*Figure 1.0.* Group effects of those participants who indicated having responsive parents. Under 50t indicates having a satisfying relationship in adulthood.

*Figure 1.1.* Maternal responsiveness and relationship satisfaction later in life, as indicated by scores on the GDS scale of the MSI-R ( $p=0.001$ ).

*Figure 1.2.* Frequency of participants whom indicated varying levels of relationship satisfaction in correspondence to the degree of their mother or primary female caregiver's responsiveness to them as a child.

*Figure 1.3.* Paternal responsiveness and GDS indicating a nonsignificant relationship ( $p=0.588$ ).

*Figure 1.4.* Frequency of participants whom indicated varying levels of relationship satisfaction in correspondence to the degree of their father or primary male caregiver's responsiveness to them as a child.

Figures

Figure 1.0 Overall Parental Responsiveness and GDS

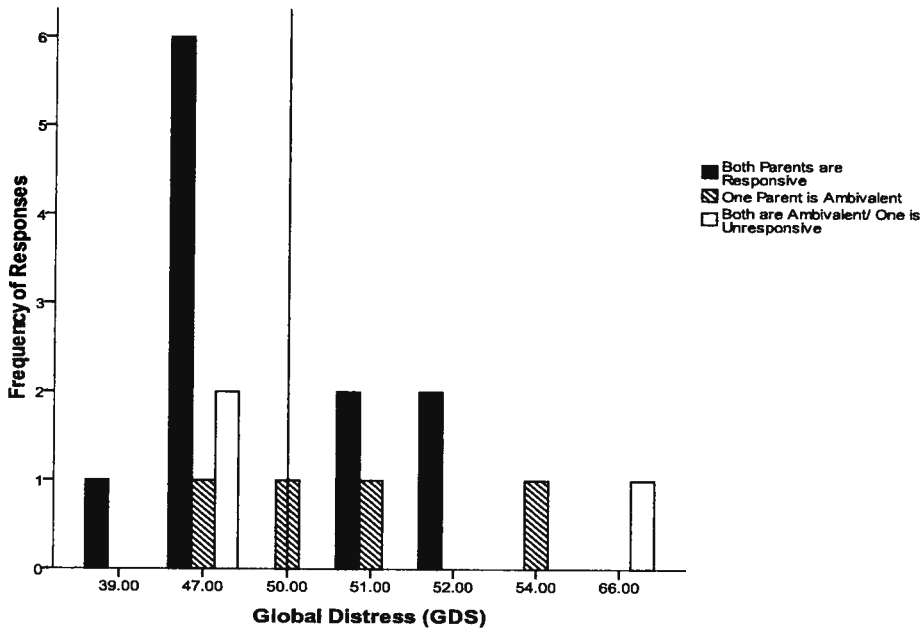


Figure 1.1 Maternal Responsiveness and GDS (Regression)

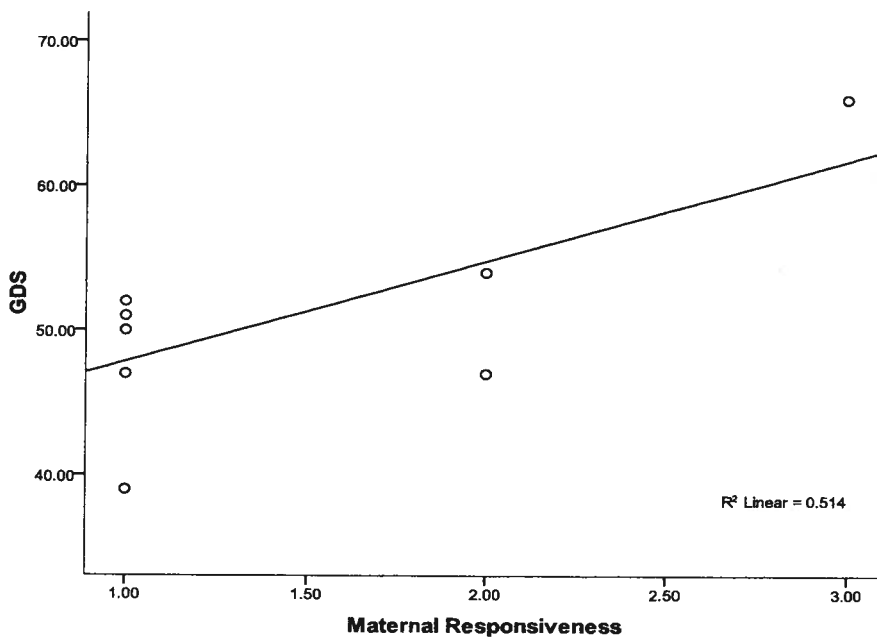


Figure 1.2 Maternal Responsiveness and GDS

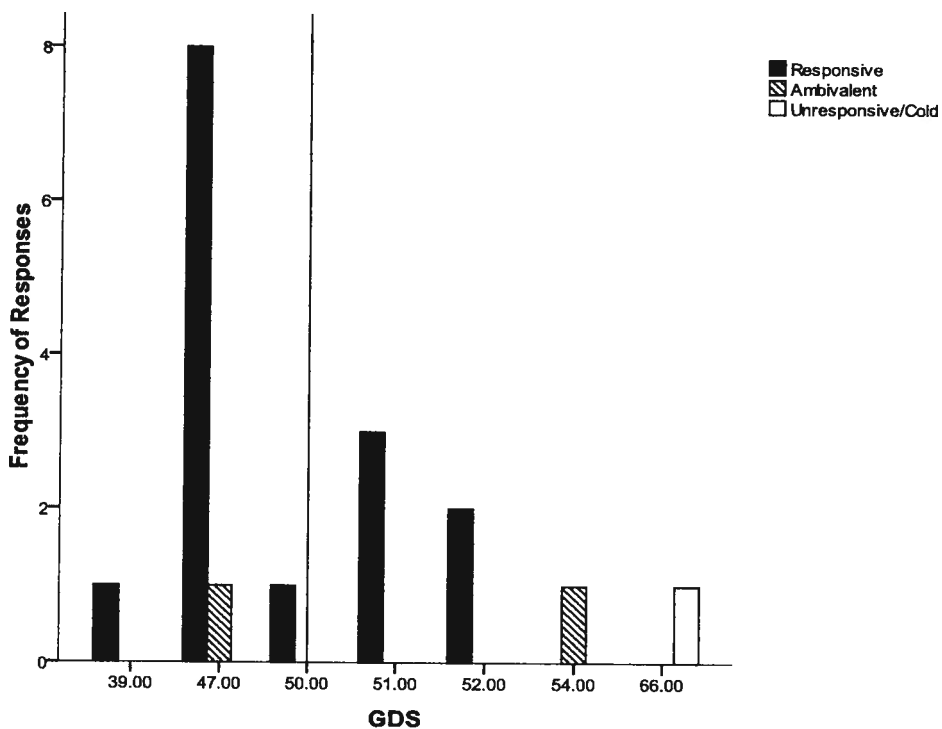


Figure 1.3 Paternal Responsiveness and GDS (Regression)

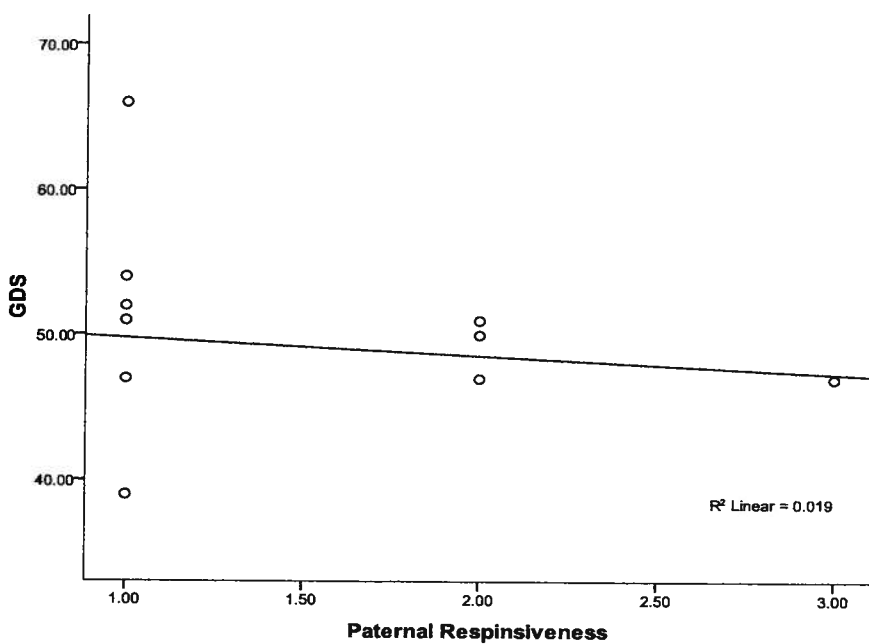


Figure 1.4 Paternal Responsiveness and GDS

