

# Maternal Attachment in Modern Family Contexts: A Systematic Review

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# Agenda

- Study rationale:
  - Why a study on maternal attachment?
- Canadian statistics on mothers:
  - StatsCan Census data
- Methodology:
  - Systematic review search and coding protocol
- Main findings
- Conclusions and Recommendations

# The Concept of Attachment

- John Bowlby (1964) describes attachment as:
  - “human tendency to form strong bonds with particular others and to become distressed upon separation from, or loss of, these with whom a bond has been made”.
- Attach behaviours are present from the cradle to the grave.
- Begins very early with bonds between infant and primary caregiver and evolves over course of lifetime into attach to romantic partner and attach of parent to child.



# The Concept of Maternal Attachment

- Maternal attachment is an internal representation of the mother and significant others in close family relationships (e.g. her children).
- It guides the mother's perceptions, interpretations, emotions, and behaviours with her infant (Flykt et al. 2010).

# Research on Maternal Attachment

- Several studies found that pre-natal maternal attachment style assessed with the AAI was predictive of infant attachment over a year later (Benoit & Parker, 1994a; Fonagy, Steele & Steele, 1991; Ward & Carlson, 1995).
  - Benoit and Parker (1994a) even found that attachment classifications were stable across three generations, from grandmother to mother to infant.
- In a study by Benoit, Zeanah and Barton (1989), researchers found that 96% of mothers with an infant that was experiencing failure-to-thrive were insecurely attached to the infant, while only 60% of mothers with a normally growing infant were insecurely attached.
  - A more recent study by Ward, Lee and Lipper (2000) found that mothers of failure-to-thrive infants were more than twice as likely as comparison mothers to indicate unresolved loss or trauma, and were less likely to show secure discourse in the AAI.
- A study by Haft and Slade (1989) also found that mothers who are securely attached are more attuned to their babies than those who are insecurely attached.

# Mothers in Canada

- As of 2006, only two thirds of Canada's 5.6 million children were living with two biological married parents. This is a substantial decline from 81.2% in 1986.
  - 603,743 adoptives families;
  - 503,000 stepfamilies;
  - 1,132,290 single-mother families;
  - 24,065 lesbian couples, 3,455 of whom were married (16.5%).
- In total, nearly **2 million mothers** in Canada alone who would benefit from research focused on increasing understanding of their specific maternal attachment experience.



# This study's objective

- The primary objective is to determine whether and how research had been conducted on maternal attachment in these specific family contexts (non-intact, non-biological, and/or non-heterosexual), and what are the most robust findings.
- The primary research question is:  
*“How has maternal attachment been studied in various modern family contexts (including adoptive, lesbian mother, single mother, and stepmother families)?”*



# Methodology

- Systematic Review v.s. Literature Review
- Primary research question: “How has maternal attachment been studied in modern family contexts?”
- Five relevant databases: PsychINFO, GLBT life + issues, Family Studies Abstracts, Women Studies Intl and PsycArticles.



# Search Process



1. Construction of a controlled terms list for each database.
2. Selection of search limits parameters (e.g. publication language, time span, article type, participants, focus).
3. Conduct the search in each database.
4. Exclude inappropriate references (e.g. duplicates, wrong article type/participant/focus) by reviewing Abstract.
5. Development of a codebook.
6. Coding completed by a main coder and a second coder to calculate inter-rater reliability.

Total Database Hits:  
705



47 duplicates  
80 article type  
187 participant type



367 wrong focus



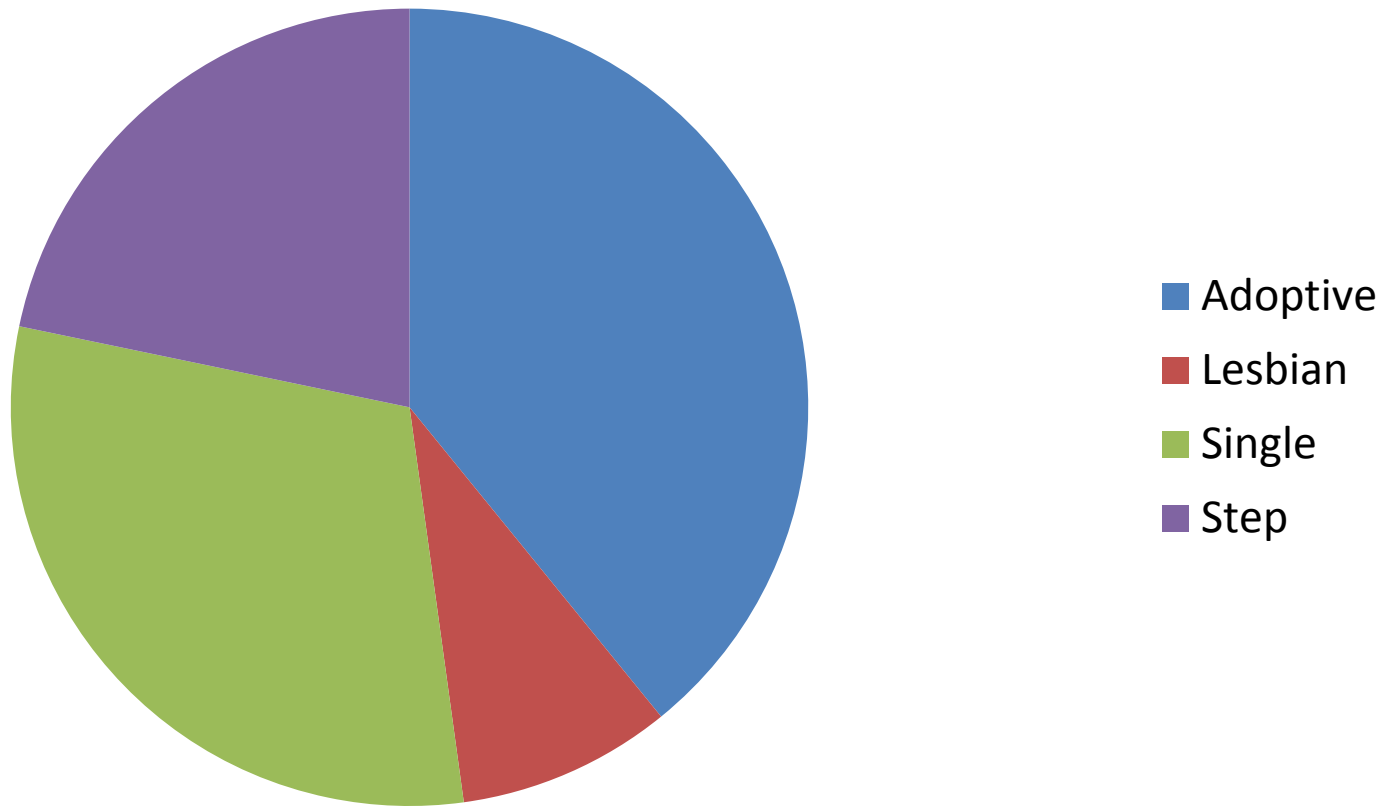
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full article



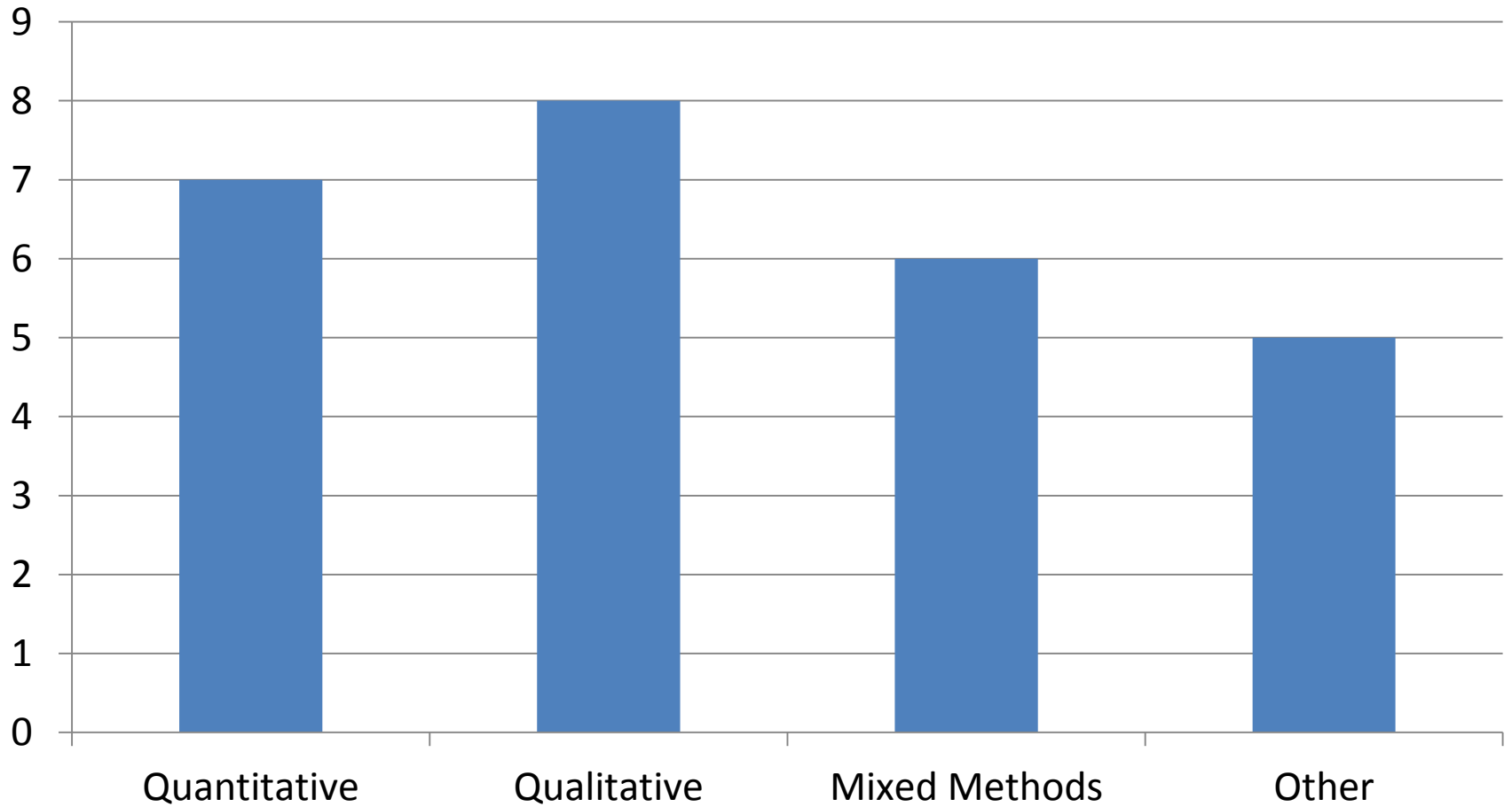
Final Sample of 22  
articles

# Articles by Mother Type

Series 1



# Methodology Used



# Main Themes

1. Mother's own perception of relationship/bond to child (5)
2. Effects of mother's attachment style/representation on child emotional adjustment/attachment security (5)
3. Mothering/Parenting (3)
4. Becoming a mother/family (4)
5. Mother-child relationship/involvement/interactions (17)
6. Conflicts/challenges in the mother-child relationship (5)

# Research on Adoptive Mothers

*« Attachment style of mother predicts attachment security of adopted child »*

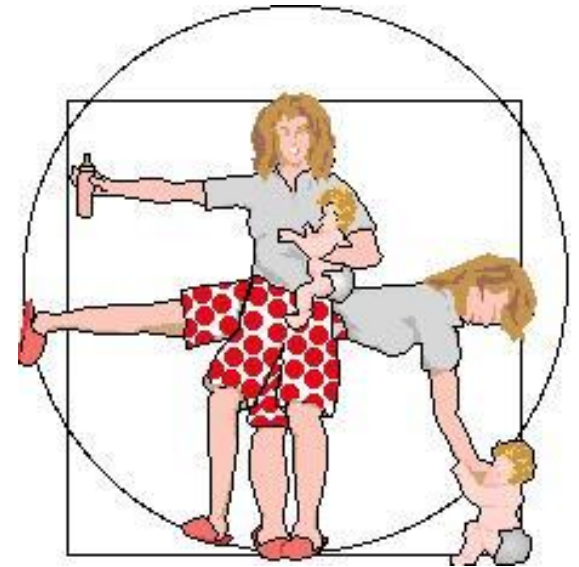
- Adopted children tend to change from insecure to secure when they have mothers with a secure attachment model (Pace & Zavattini, 2010; Steele et al., 2003; Verissimo & Salvaterra, 2006).



# Research on Lesbian Mothers

« *Challenging the traditional discourse of love* »

- Focus on new patterns of love in lesbian families and exploring passion and non-sexual desire in lesbian mother-child love (Gabb, 2001; 2004).



# Research on Single Mothers

*« The single mother's experience exists as a deficit-model of married mothers' experience »*

- Mother-child relationships tend to be more positive in married than in single-mother families (Aronson & Huston, 2004; Dunn et al., 2000).
- Married mothers are more likely to have secure scripts than single mothers (Gaffney et al., 2000).
- Divorced single mothers and single mothers who conceived using DI show greater disengagement and emotional distance from their children than married mothers (Guttman & Rosenberg, 2003; Murray & Golombok, 2005).





# Research on Stepmothers

- « *Lack of any unifying theme related to attachment* »
- Stepmothers' attachment style predicts type of difficulty experienced with stepchildren (Ceglian & Gardner, 2000).
- Biological mothers report more positive mother-child relationship than do stepmothers, as confirmed by children's account (Dunn et al, 2000).
- Stepmothers spontaneously differentiate maternal relationship in relating to their own children and their stepchildren (Perez & Torrens, 2009).



# Conclusions and Recommendations

- Given the diversity of modern family contexts, there is a strong need for more and better research in this area.
- Attachment is a two-way process, but research appears to focus almost exclusively on the infant's attachment to the mother, leaving the mother's experience understudied.
- More attention is needed for the growing population of mothers who operate in families outside of the dominant model of the intact (and predominantly biological) family, in situations where attachment to a child may be complicated by a lack of biological relatedness, late placement, or absence of social scripts.



# Thank you!

