

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FOSTER CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR
& FOSTER PARENTS' PSYCHOLOGICAL STATES

by

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INTRODUCTION

Relationships, as topics of research, between foster children's emotional or behavioral problems and foster parents' psychological distress or mood problems have received little attention despite the prevalence of foster care found in the world today. In 2008 alone, 542,000 children in the United States had foster care placements (Bruskas). Fostering children is not only highly prevalent nationally, but also worldwide in response to the ever-growing number of orphans, which was estimated to be around 210 million in 2008 according to the United Nations Children's Fund ("Mission one million"). The purpose of the current study is to conduct a preliminary, correlational investigation of the possible association between emotional or behavioral problems of Romanian foster children and psychological distress or mood problems of their foster parents.

Some psychologists, such as Miriam Steele, recognize the importance of evaluating relationships between psychological traits in children and parents in the realm of adoption where parent-child relationships lack genetic links (Steele, Hodges, Kaniuk, & Steele 2003a; Steele, Hodges, Kaniuk, Hillman, & Henderson, 2003b). Based on the research conducted by Steele and her colleagues, a predictive framework was created for the current study in light of the lack of research specifically related to the relationships between foster children and foster parents.

Steele and her colleagues conducted two studies in 2003 with the intent to demonstrate the "usefulness of using measures, originating in developmental

and clinical research and practice, in understanding special samples of children and their parents” (Steele et al., 2003a; Steele et al., 2003b). The first study was longitudinal in nature and implemented interview assessments, the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) for adoptive parents and the Story Stem Assessment Profile for adopted children, and video observations to assess a possible relationship between an adopted child’s negative internal working model and an adoptive parent’s positive internal working model. “Bowlby (1969) incorporated from Piagetian cognitive psychology the term *internal working model* to refer to the process by which children arrive at internal representations of their emotional experiences and significant relationships” (Steele et al., 2003a). Participants were fifty-eight later-adopted children ages four to eight and forty-one adoptive mothers. The study concluded that an adoptive parent’s positive internal working model gains precedence over an adopted child’s negative working model in a short period of time (2003a). In other words, “the capacity to mentalize is potentially transferred from parent to child “ (2003a). In relation to the current study, these research findings indicate that relationships can exist between the mental states of non-genetically linked parents and children. In this study, the mental states evolved to match one another, suggesting or predicting perhaps, that foster children’s emotional and behavioral problems could similarly influence foster parents’ psychological distress or mood problems.

The second study conducted in 2003 by Steele assessed the influence of adoptive maternal states of mind, in terms of attachment, on adopted children’s attachment styles, both pre and post adoption (Steele et al., 2003b). Similar to

the first study, interview assessments were utilized including the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) for the adoptive mothers and the Story Stem Battery for the adopted children. Participants were forty-three adoptive mothers who had sixty-one later-adopted children ages four through eight. Results of the study indicated strong and positive correlations between the adoptive mother's attachment style and themes revealed in the adopted children's story completions. For example, "mothers whose AAIs were judged insecure were likely to have adopted children who, three months after placement, provided story-completions with higher levels of aggressiveness as compared to the stories provided by children adopted by mothers with secure-autonomous AAIs" (2003b). The findings in this study again indicate that the mental states of adoptive children can evolve in a very short period of time to match the mental states of their adoptive parents.

Both of these studies are relevant to the current study. First, both studies include later-adopted children in the population sample. The current study population includes foster children, who statistically are more likely to have been placed later in life. Second, both studies utilize short time frames for assessments of change. Some foster parent-child relationships are very short in nature, as children may be placed multiple times for many reasons or they may age out of the foster care system. Based on the findings of the two Steele studies, one can predict that a child's mental state, or emotional problems, can influence a parent's mental state, or psychological distress in a short period of time as assessed in the current study (2003a, 2003b).

Current Study

Overall, the current study was designed to explore possible effects of Romanian foster children's behavior on foster parents' psychological states. Specifically, the current study aimed to examine the relationship between the behaviors of foster children as potential triggers or causes of mood problems or psychological distress of foster parents. The current study attempts to contribute findings related to attachment and mental representations in adoptive children and parents to create a predictive framework for the following three proposed hypotheses:

- 1) Relationships exist between the foster children's emotional and behavioral problems, as defined by the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL/6-18)
- 2) Relationships exist between the foster parents' emotional distress and mood problems, as defined by the Profile of Mood States (POMS)
- 3) Foster children's emotional and behavioral problems, as defined by the CBCL/6-18, show a relationship with foster parents' emotional distress and mood problems, as defined by the POMS

METHOD

Participants

The study population included children under legal protection of the County Social Assistance and Child's Care Directorate (CSACCD) in one Romanian county. The supervising psychologist, presiding over all CSACCD psychologists in this county, periodically directed certain psychological assessments to be given to the CSACCD children in this county. The supervising psychologists for each county determine how often and which assessments are used in their county. In the Romanian county where the present study was performed, the CBCL was typically included in the periodic assessments for all children over six years of age.

During the period of data collection, approximately 400 children were under the legal protection of CSACCD in this county. During the assessment period (May-June 2009) approximately one hundred and thirty of these children were between the ages of six and eighteen. One hundred and twenty one CBCL forms were returned for the children (59 boys and 62 girls). Therefore, the forms were examined for approximately 93.1% of the children in this county between the ages of six and eighteen at the time of the current study. Of these one hundred and twenty one children, nine (3 boys and 6 girls) were excluded because of incomplete data and three (1 girl and 2 boys) were excluded due to an autism diagnosis. This initial group represented 84% of all foster children between the ages of six and eighteen in this county. Of the remaining one

hundred and nine children, sixty-eight were selected as the final sample because their data could be accurately paired with their foster parents' complete data sets.

Participants in the final sample (n=68) were all Romanian foster children between the ages of seven and fourteen. Of the sixty-eight children, thirty-eight were boys and thirty were girls. Each foster child was assessed by his or her caregiver who, in most cases, was the foster mother. The data collected from the assessments of the foster children was paired with data collected from their foster parents (n=52) who were all between the ages of thirty-three and sixty. Fifty-two pairs total were assessed.

Procedure

Dr. Adrian Rus obtained approval for the current study from the appropriate Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research. Furthermore, one of Dr. Rus's Romanian collaborators obtained written consent from the appropriate Romanian authorities to use the foster children's archival data for research purposes. Replacing names with identification numbers on all research documents and analyses protected foster parents' and children's' privacy.

During May and June 2009, CBCL/6-18 assessments were given to foster parents who had the option to complete the forms in the CSACCD office or at home. Of the forms taken home, most were returned within one or two weeks. All forms returned by the end of June 2009 were analyzed for this study. All returned forms were placed directly into the appropriate child's file at the CSACCD office and became part of the archival data for that child. Thus, all

data for this study was collected from this archival data. The inclusion criterion for the current study were foster children between the ages of six to eighteen, under the protection of a specific CSACCD jurisdiction, with no diagnosis of autism, and with a completed CBCL/6-18 (completed in 2009) in their official file.

Measures

Foster Children

The Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) is a questionnaire designed to measure specific behavior and competency constructs in children reported by parents or caregivers. Two versions of the questionnaire exist. For the current study, the CBCL/6-18 was used as all participants fell within this age range. The questionnaire contains twenty items pertaining to a child's competency and one hundred and twenty items pertaining to the same child's behavioral and emotional problems during the previous six months. The one hundred and forty items on the CBCL/6-18 are reported using a three-point Likert scale (0 = Not True, 1 = Somewhat or Sometimes True, 2 = Very True or Often True; Achenbach, 1991).

The CBCL contains eight syndrome scales including Anxiety, Depression, Somatic Complaints, Social Problems, Thought Problems, Attention, Rule Breaking Behavior, and Aggression. CBCL/6-18 scales also generate composite scales. The Internalizing composite includes Anxious/Depressed, Withdrawn/Depressed, and Somatic scales; the Externalizing composite includes Rule-Breaking Behavior and Aggression scales; and the Total Problems composite includes the Internalizing composite, Externalizing

composite, and other problems (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). The internal consistency of CBCL ranges between .78 and .97 and test-retest reliability ranges between .95 and 1.00 (Achenbach 1991).

With eighty-five translations of the CBCL available, a recent study by Wild, Furtado, and Angalakuditi has found it culturally valid and useful in multinational studies (2012). Moreover, the CBCL has been analyzed in many specific societies, including Romania, and its indices strongly support the syndrome structure of these assessments and use of these scales for specific societies, such as Romania (Ivanova et al., 2007). The use of the CBCL is appropriate for this study because it has been validated for use not only in Romania, but also, with foster children in long-term foster and residential care (Albrecht, Veerman, Damen, & Kroes, 2001; Tarren-Sweeney et al., 2004).

Foster Parents

The Profile of Mood States (POMS) measures mood problems or psychological distress based on the assessment of a self-report mood adjective checklist assessing discrete mood states (Shacham, 1983). It is sensitive to mood state fluctuations in psychiatric outpatients, medical patients, normal adults, college students (David, Montgomery, & Bovbjerg, 2006; DiLorenzo, David, & Montgomery, 2007; Terry, Lane, & Fogarty, 2003), and Romanian individuals (Kállay, Ţincaş, & Benga, 2009; Moldovan, 2009). The POMS consists of a factor-analysis derived checklist containing sixty-five items that include six subscales designed to measure identifiable moods or affective states, such as Tension-Anxiety, Depression-Dejection, Anger-Hostility, Fatigue-

Inertia, Confusion-Bewilderment (negative mood state), and Vigor-Activity (positive mood state).

For assessment of the psychological states of foster parents in the current study, only three of the six POMS subscales were utilized including Tension-Anxiety, Depression-Dejection, and Anger-Hostility. In particular, the Tension-Anxiety subscale assessed the subjective state and somatic experience of anxiety; the Depression-Dejection subscale assessed feelings of inadequacy, isolation, guilt, futility, or sadness; and the Anger-Hostility subscale assessed hostility and irritability. The subscales can be scored individually or summed up as Total Distress (Shacham, 1983).

For the current study, the POMS questionnaires were distributed with the standard instructions and participants, the foster parents, responded to each item using a five-point Likert scale (i.e., *0 = not at all; 1 = a little; 2 = moderately; 3 = quite a bit; 4 = extremely*). Completion of the questionnaire took between five and ten minutes. Respondents rated a series of mood states (such as “Confused,” “Without Hope,” or “Tired”) based on how well each item described the respondent’s mood during the two weeks prior to the administration of the POMS. High scores on POMS subscales reflect high levels of distress. The internal consistency of POMS is .90 and test-retest reliability ranges between .65 and .74 (Moldovan, 2009).

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Tables A and B show the descriptive statistics in terms of the entire sample of foster children and the entire sample of foster parents. The sample of foster children showed high scores on the CBCL/6-18 constructs, Social Problems, Attention, and Rule Breaking Behaviors (see table A). Higher scores in the sample of foster children were found on the Externalizing composite than on the Internalizing or Total Problems composites. The sample of foster parents showed high scores on the POMS subscales, Tension-Anxiety and Depression-Dejection (see table B).

Correlations between Constructs

Table C shows the within-set correlations of the CBCL/6-18. The sample reports that Anxiety is positively correlated with most of the remaining seven CBCL/6-18 constructs. Anxiety is positively correlated most significantly with Social Problems, but also significantly with Depression and Thought Problems. The sample also reports that Rule Breaking Behaviors have strong positive correlations with Aggression, but also with Thought Problems and Social Problems. Similarly, the sample reports that Aggression had strong positive correlations with Attention and Rule Breaking Behaviors. Aggression was also positively correlated with Social Problems. Furthermore, Social Problems positively correlated most significantly with Attention, Aggression, and Anxiety. The CBCL.6-18 within-set correlations yielded several significant results.

Table D shows the within-set correlations of the POMS. The sample reports weak and positive correlations between Anger-Hostility and Depression-Dejection. The sample also reports very weak and positive correlations between Tension-Anxiety and Depression-Dejection. However, the sample reports that a weak and negative correlation exists between Tension-Anxiety and Anger-Hostility. Strong and positive correlations are found between Total Distress and Depression-Dejection and Total-Distress and Anger-Hostility. The POMS within-set correlations yielded very few significant results.

Table E shows the between-set correlations of the CBCL/6-18 and POMS. The sample reports weak and negative correlations between Tension-Anxiety as a subscale of POMS and all CBCL/6-18 constructs and composites except Somatic Complaints, which has a very weak and negative correlation with Tension-Anxiety. The second POMS subscale used in this study, Depression-Dejection, also has a weak and negative correlation with most CBCL/6-18 constructs and composites except Depression, Somatic Complaints, and Internalizing Composite, which all have very weak positive correlations with Depression-Dejection. The third POMS subscale used in the current study, Anger-Hostility, has very weak and positive correlations with all eight CBCL/6-18 constructs and three composites. Although still very weak, Anger-Hostility is most highly correlated with Social Problems. The sample shows that the POMS composite, Total Distress, has no strong positive or negative correlations with any CBCL/6-18 constructs or composites. The between-set correlations of the CBCL/6-18 and POMS yielded no significant results.

DISCUSSION

Implications and Interpretations

Regarding the data, no significant correlations support the major proposed prediction of the study to show a relationship between foster children's emotional and behavioral problems with foster parents' emotional distress and mood problems. However, some strong and positive correlations were found between constructs of the CBCL/6-18 indicating certain problems are predictive, or highly correlated, with other constructs. In light of the inconsistent support of all three hypotheses, it is interesting to note that the results of the current study failed to meet the predictive framework created at the start of the study. Based on valid research and intuition, a strong and positive correlation between foster children's emotional and behavioral problems and foster parents' emotional distress and mood problems seems obvious. Speculations can be made that no such correlations were found in the current study due to the data collection in Romania where foster parent-child relationships may be different altogether or the use of only one measure for each population in the assessed pairs created assessments of the wrong relationships. Perhaps the wrong measures were used to reveal a positively correlated relationship.

Limitations

The current study was not without limitations. The participants in the current study's population were gathered from one county in Romania. As a result, all participants likely had similar cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. In consideration of the purpose and procedures of the current study, gathering

participants from this single geographic location may have limited the validity and generalizability of the study's findings. As mentioned before, the lack of correlations found between foster children's behavior and foster parents' psychological states can likely be attributed in part to the single location of data collection. Conducting this study with participants gathered from a more heterogeneous population could have yielded stronger correlations. Future participants could be selected from various countries differing in culture, size, geographic location, and governmental structure (as an influence of the foster care system). A diverse population of participants would allow the results of this study to be generalized to a wider range of people.

Another limitation of the current study was the small sample size ($n=52$). Studies with small sample sizes often overestimate the significance of a correlation or generate false-positive results. Consequently, small sample sizes also often limit generalizability of the study's conclusions. If a larger number of foster parent-child pairs were assessed, it would allow for a narrower confidence interval in response to the results yielded by the data analysis. Conducting this study with a larger sample size, including more diversity in the study's population and possibly more than one study design, could have yielded different results including significantly stronger or weaker correlations between CBCL/6-18 constructs and POMS subscales.

In addition to the limitation of the small sample size in the current study, use of only one measurement tool, the CBCL/6-18, for foster children, and only one measurement tool, the POMS, for foster parents created further limitations.

Considering the hypotheses of the current study, multiple measurements could have been used for both foster children and parents in order to allow more complete assessment of the possible relationships between children's behavior and parents' psychological states. To further assess children's behavior from the perspective of someone other than a parent or caregiver, future studies could utilize data gathered from the Teacher Report Form (TRF). Additionally, to further assess parents' psychological states, future studies could utilize measurements such as the Spielberger State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory (STAXI), Unconditional Self-Acceptance Questionnaire (USAQ), or the Attitudes and Beliefs Scale II (ABS II).

For the purpose of this study, the first hypothesis was supported, indicating the need for a larger scale and more detailed study focused on the correlations between constructs of behavior in foster children. The second and third hypotheses were not supported by the data analysis. The results of the current study indicate that no apparent relationship exists between foster children's behavior and foster parents' psychological state. However, changes to the size and makeup of the study's population, as well as additions made to the types of measurement tools used to assess the study's population, might yield different results. Perhaps with these changes, a correlational relationship could emerge and prove to exist much like this study initially predicted.

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TABLE A

CBCL/6-18 Construct Descriptives

Construct	Mean	SD	Range
Sample (n=68)			
Anxiety	53.84	5.23	17
Depression	57.40	6.50	20
Somatic Complaints	54.88	5.57	24
Social Problems	59.15	8.08	30
Thought Problems	53.99	5.64	23
Attention	58.93	8.69	43
Rule-Breaking	58.44	6.59	26
Aggression	57.82	8.18	35
Internalizing Composite	52.54	9.35	40
Externalizing Composite	56.57	9.44	45
Total Problems	55.53	10.14	47

T-scores: Mean: 50
SD: 10

TABLE B

POMS Construct T-Score Descriptives

Construct	Mean	SD	Range
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Sample (n=52)

Tension-Anxiety	11.94	2.61	13
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Depressing-Dejection	11.31	4.34	17
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Anger-Hostility	4.13	2.62	9
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Distress Total	46.67	11.28	53
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T-scores: Mean: 50

SD: 10

TABLE C

CBCL/6-18 Within-Set CorrelationsCorrelation Matrix (CBCL x CBCL)

Sample (n=68)

	Anx.	Dep.	Som.	Soc.	Tht.	Att.	Rule	Agg.	Int.	Ext.	Total Problems
Anx.	1.00	0.59	0.42	0.61	0.48	0.48	0.29	0.41	0.79	0.39	0.63
Dep.	0.59	1.00	0.42	0.44	0.30	0.23	0.29	0.20	0.81	0.26	0.46
Som.	0.42	0.42	1.00	0.41	0.30	0.18	0.24	0.19	0.67	0.21	0.44
Soc.	0.61	0.44	0.41	1.00	0.44	0.70	0.54	0.62	0.62	0.64	0.81
Tht.	0.48	0.30	0.30	0.44	1.00	0.48	0.54	0.52	0.48	0.54	0.63
Att.	0.48	0.23	0.18	0.70	0.48	1.00	0.48	0.74	0.40	0.68	0.76
Rule	0.29	0.29	0.24	0.54	0.54	0.48	1.00	0.73	0.40	0.84	0.73
Agg.	0.41	0.20	0.19	0.62	0.52	0.74	0.73	1.00	0.38	0.92	0.79
Int.	0.79	0.81	0.67	0.62	0.48	0.40	0.40	0.38	1.00	0.44	0.72
Ext.	0.39	0.26	0.21	0.64	0.54	0.68	0.84	0.92	0.44	1.00	0.88
Total Problems	0.63	0.46	0.44	0.81	0.63	0.76	0.73	0.79	0.72	0.88	1.00

Probability Values (CBCL x CBCL)

	Anx.	Dep.	Som.	Soc.	Tht.	Att.	Rule	Agg.	Int.	Ext.	Total Problems
Anx.	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.15	0.01	0.00	0.01	0
Dep.	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.14	0.31	0.15	0.33	0.00	0.22	0
Som.	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.14	0.33	0.30	0.33	0.00	0.33	0
Soc.	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0
Tht.	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0
Att.	0.00	0.06	0.14	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0
Rule	0.02	0.02	0.05	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0
Agg.	0.00	0.10	0.12	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0
Int.	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0
Ext.	0.00	0.03	0.08	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0
Total Problems	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0

* $p < 0.01$

** $p < 0.05$

Probability values adjusted for multiple tests.

TABLE D

POMS Within-Set CorrelationsCorrelation Matrix (POMS x POMS)

Sample (n=52)

	Tension-Anxiety	Depression-Dejection	Anger-Hostility	Distress-Total
Tension-Anxiety	1.00	0.06	-0.05	0.39
Depression-Dejection	0.06	1.00	0.42	0.73
Anger-Hostility	-0.05	0.42	1.00	0.61
Distress-Total	0.39	0.73	0.61	1.00

Probability Values (POMS x POMS)

	Tension-Anxiety	Depression-Dejection	Anger-Hostility	Distress-Total
Tension-Anxiety	0.00	1.00	1.00	0.01
Depression-Dejection	0.68	0.00	0.01	0.00
Anger-Hostility	0.72	0.00	0.00	0.00
Distress-Total	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

* $p < 0.01$ ** $p < 0.05$

Probability values adjusted for multiple tests.

TABLE E

CBCL/6-18 and POMS Between-Set CorrelationsCorrelation Matrix (CBCL x POMS)

Sample (n=52)

	Tension-Anxiety	Depression-Dejection	Anger-Hostility	Distress-Total
Anx.	-0.22	-0.04	0.20	-0.09
Dep.	-0.30	0.03	0.05	-0.02
Som.	0.05	0.07	0.21	0.08
Soc.	-0.18	-0.01	0.23	0.03
Tht.	-0.10	-0.01	0.05	-0.16
Att.	-0.26	-0.14	0.11	-0.15
Rule	-0.10	-0.09	0.11	-0.12
Agg.	-0.26	-0.14	0.10	-0.16
Int.	-0.14	-0.01	0.20	0.01
Ext.	-0.26	-0.11	0.15	-0.14
Total Problems	-0.23	-0.07	0.21	-0.06

Probability Values (CBCL x POMS)

	Tension-Anxiety	Depression-Dejection	Anger-Hostility	Distress-Total
Anx.	1	1	1	1
Dep.	1	1	1	1
Som.	1	1	1	1
Soc.	1	1	1	1
Tht.	1	1	1	1
Att.	1	1	1	1
Rule	1	1	1	1
Agg.	1	1	1	1
Int.	1	1	1	1
Ext.	1	1	1	1
Total Problems	1	1	1	1

* $p < 0.01$

** $p < 0.05$

Probability values adjusted for multiple tests.

ILLUSTRATION A

CBCL/6-18 Within-Set Correlations Scatterplot Matrix

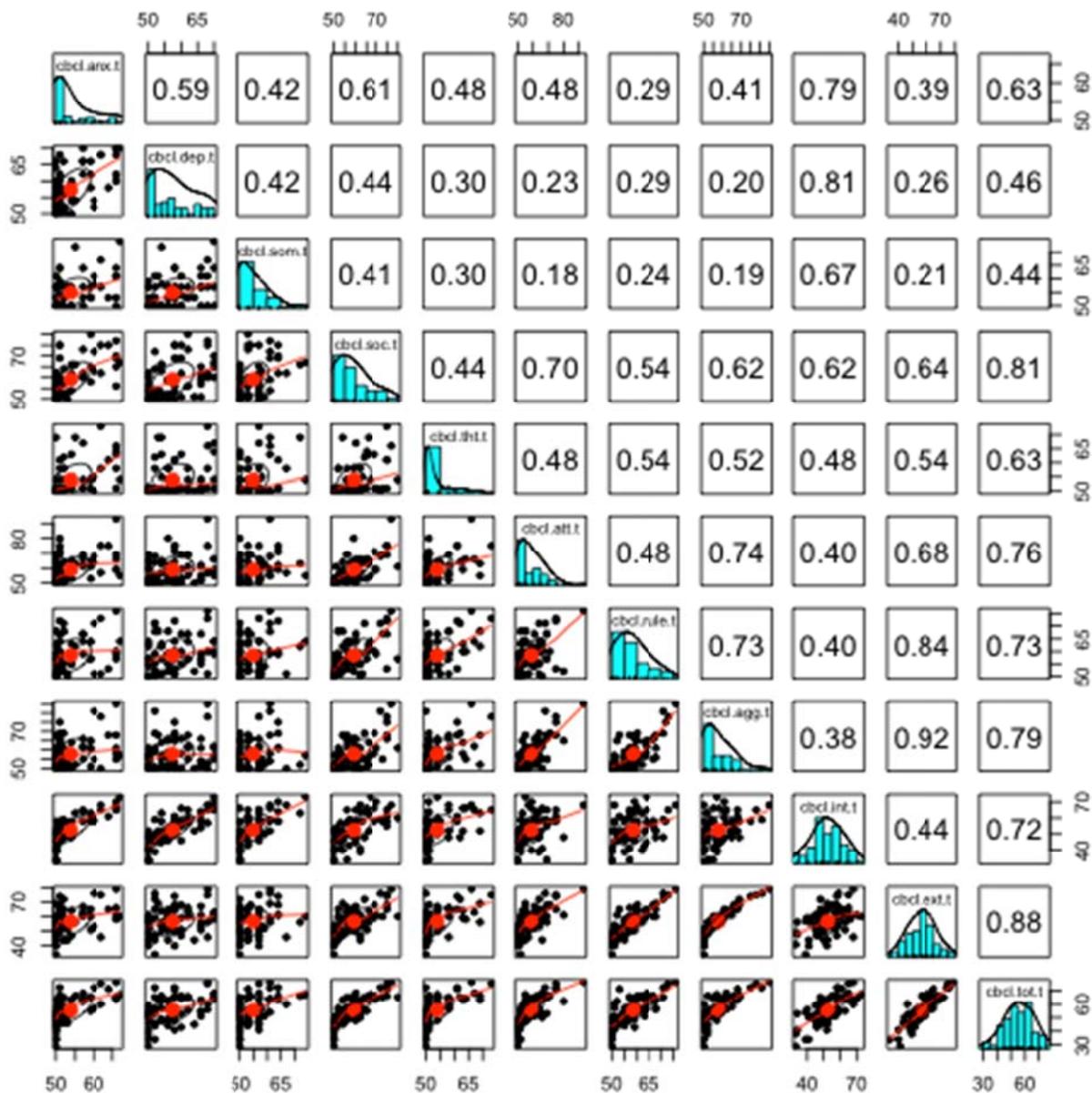
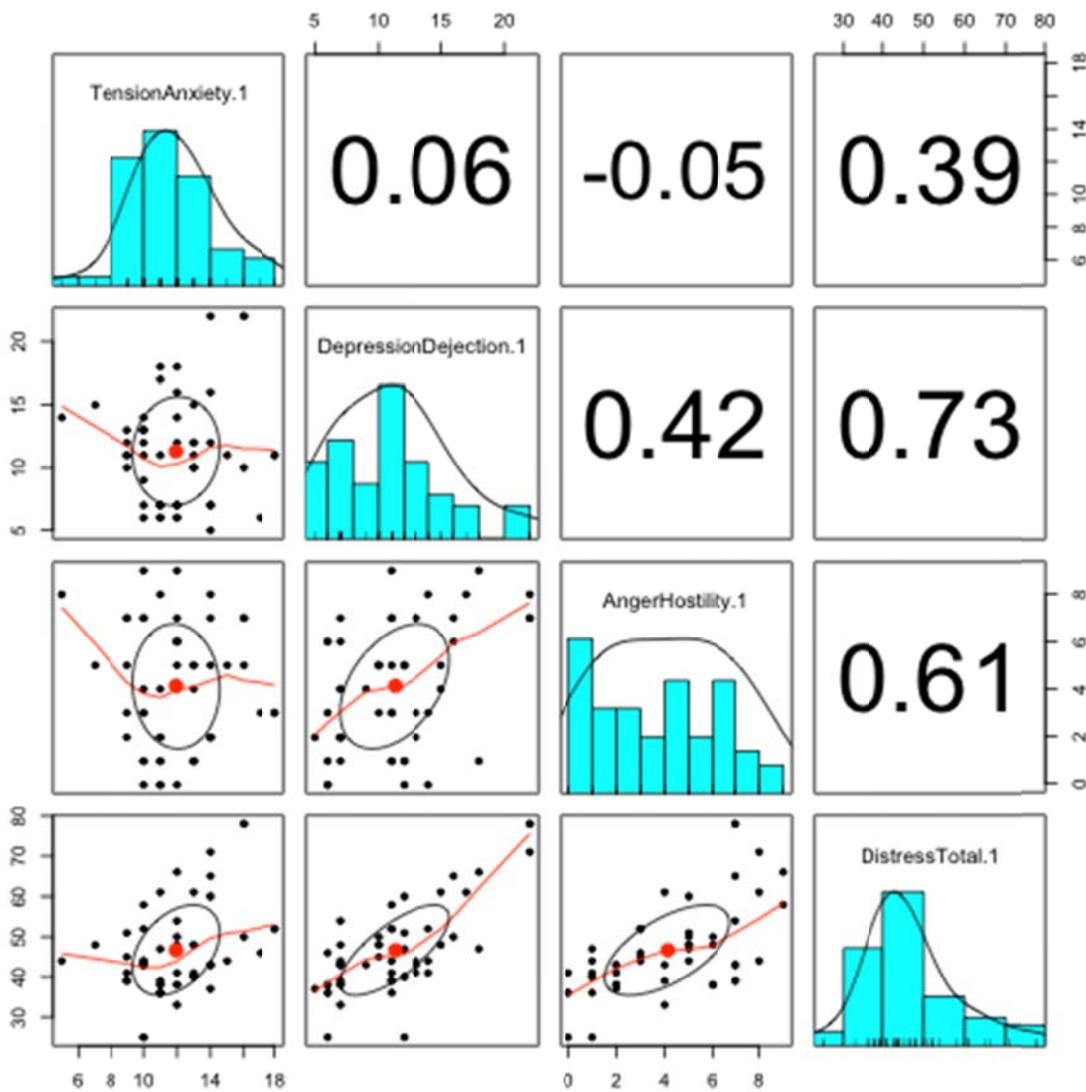


ILLUSTRATION B

POMS Within-Set Correlations Scatterplot Matrix



ABSTRACT

In the current study, the effects of foster children's emotional and behavioral problems on foster parents' psychological distress and mood problems are assessed in relation to research on attachment and mental representation in parent-child adoptive relationships (Steele et al., 2003a; Steele et al., 2003b). The Child Behavior Checklist, developed by Achenbach (1991), was used to assess the foster children's emotional and behavioral problems. The Profile of Mood States, developed by McNair, Lorr, and Droppleman (1971), was used to assess the foster parents' psychological distress and mood problems. Foster children and foster parents were paired and analyzed accordingly for correlational relationships.

This correlational study was guided by three hypotheses. The first hypothesis speculated that relationships exist between the foster children's emotional and behavioral problems, as defined by the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL/6-18). The second hypothesis speculated that relationships exist between the foster parents' emotional distress and mood problems, as defined by the Profile of Mood States (POMS). The third and final hypothesis speculated that foster children's emotional and behavioral problems, as defined by the CBCL/6-18, show a relationship with their foster parents' emotional distress and mood problems, as defined by the POMS.

Through this study, several strong, positive correlations were found between CBCL/6-18 constructs. Therefore, the first hypothesis was strongly supported. However, no fairly significant correlations were found between POMS

subscales. Consequently, the second hypothesis was not fully supported. Lastly, no significant correlations were found between CBCL/6-18 constructs and composites and POMS subscales and the distress composite. As a result, the third hypothesis was not supported by the results of the current study. However, presumptions can be made concerning possible reasons for the lack of support for the third hypothesis. With these presumptions taken into consideration, future studies can expand on the premises explored in the current study.