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## MATERNAL SEPARATION ANXIETY FROM THE FAMILY POLICY PERSPECTIVE: OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE RATINGS OF FINANCIAL SITUATION

### (Abstract)

Maternal Separation Anxiety (MSA) is a condition defined by an unpleasant emotional state associated with the experience of separation from the infant. Previous studies have shown, that high levels of MSA may be caused, among other factors, by difficult socioeconomic conditions characterized by social characteristics such as poor neighbourhood quality, low-income level, low socioeconomic position and low job satisfaction. This article presents the relation between objective income of mothers and MSA levels and subjective ratings of financial situations and MSA levels. The article presents the results of quantitative research carried out by the author on Polish mothers (survey questionnaire of 153 mothers with first born children between 1–12 months, on maternity leaves and living with a partner). Results of the study show that mothers with lower net income per family member had higher MSA levels and that mothers who rated their financial situation as worse, also had higher MSA levels. The final aim of the article is to provide an answer to the question how specific family policy instruments may contribute to reducing MSA levels in mothers and increase the well being of the family.

**Keywords:** Maternal Separation Anxiety; Family Policy; Socioeconomic Position

### 1. Introduction

In 1956, English paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott described a psychological condition he termed ‘primary maternal preoccupation’. The idea was, that all mothers have a universal, primary maternal preoccupation

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with their young infants<sup>1</sup>. In later years, a study by Benedek (1970), as cited in Hock, McBride and Gnezda (1989)<sup>2</sup>, showed evidence for some type of maternal preoccupation with infants. The study showed that some feelings of separation anxiety are normal in all mothers and that these feelings are elicited when the child is absent even for a short while<sup>3</sup>.

With this information in mind, Hock, McBride and Gnezda (1989) focused their studies on the stresses related to mothers' separation from the infant. When studying mothers' emotions and behaviours, Hock, McBride and Gnezda (1989) showed that a majority of mothers displayed moderate separation anxiety, with the remaining mothers divided into low or high separation anxiety groups. This provided evidence for the belief that all mothers, to a certain degree, experience anxiety caused by their maternal role. The authors termed the condition MSA and viewed it as a "complex, multidimensional, multidetermined construct"<sup>4</sup>. They defined MSA as "an unpleasant emotional state tied to the separation experience: it may be evidenced by expressions of worry, sadness or guilt"<sup>5</sup>. The authors believed that the feelings mothers experienced related to separation from their infants were determined by factors such as a mother's personality, her genetically determined biases, and her cultural background. However, research shows that MSA levels are not simply a reflection of a mother's personality, biases, or culture, but that the child's characteristics and the social circumstances of the mother also play a role in MSA levels<sup>6</sup>.

Hock, McBride, and Gnezda (1989) conducted a study to develop an instrument necessary for measuring mothers' separation anxiety from their infants. Based on previous theoretical and empirical work, the authors identified several content areas used to provide an organizational structure for the generation of

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**Hollway W.**, *Rereading Winnicott's 'Primary maternal preoccupation'*, *Feminism & Psychology* 2011/22, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> **Hock E., McBride S., Gnezda M.T.**, *Maternal separation anxiety: Mother-infant separation from the maternal perspective*, *Child Development* 1989/660, pp. 793–802.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> **McBride S.L.**, *Maternal moderators of child care: The role of maternal separation anxiety*, *New Directions for Child Development* 1990/49, pp. 53–69.

items for the scale they developed called the Maternal Separation Anxiety Scale (MSAS)<sup>7</sup>. The MSAS focused on areas such as:

expressions of feelings about separation (e.g. reports of maternal sadness, worry, and/or guilt surrounding a mother-child separation event) desire for physical closeness and cuddling, attitudes about the value or importance of exclusive maternal care, beliefs about the child's ability to adapt and profit from non-maternal care, and concerns about the issue of employment-related separations<sup>8</sup>.

The final version of the MSAS consisted of 35-items divided into three resulting subscales; Subscale 1 – General MSA, Subscale 2 – Perception of Separation Effects on the Child, and Subscale 3 – Employment Related Separation Concerns. The MSAS is a reliable and valid way to operationally measure MSA.

## 2. Consequences of Heightened Levels of MSA

Heightened levels of MSA affect many areas of mothers' functioning; they affect mothers' childcare choices and perception of childcare availability<sup>9</sup>, mothers' mental health<sup>10</sup>, mothers' employment decisions<sup>11</sup>, and infant attachment patterns<sup>12</sup>.

Mothers with higher levels of MSA are more likely to have infants with avoidant attachment style, while mothers with lower levels of MSA are likely to have securely-attached children. Securely-attached children receive optimal levels of independence from the mother and are likely to develop a healthy sense of self which leads to confident functioning in adulthood and ability to form secure

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6; **Buffardi L.C., Edwins C.J.**, *Child-care satisfaction: Linkages to work attitudes, interrole conflict, and maternal separation anxiety*, *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 1997/2, pp. 84–96.

<sup>10</sup> **Hock E., DeMeis D.K.**, *Depression in mothers of infants: The role of maternal employment*, *Journal of Family Psychology* 1990/12, pp. 41–55; **Hock E., Schirtzinger M.B.**, *Maternal separation anxiety: Its developmental course and relation to maternal mental health*, *Child Development* 1992/63, pp. 93–102.

<sup>11</sup> **McBride S., Belsky J.**, *Characteristics, determinants, and consequences of maternal separation anxiety*, *Developmental Psychology* 1988/24, pp. 407–414; **Stifter C.A., Coulehan C.M., Fish M.**, *Linking employment to attachment: the mediating effects of maternal separation anxiety and interactive behaviour*, *Child Dev* 1993/64(5), pp. 1451–1460; **Wille D.E.**, *Longitudinal analysis of mothers' and fathers' responses on the maternal separation anxiety scale*, *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 1998/44, pp. 216–233.

<sup>12</sup> **McBride S., Belsky J.**, *Characteristics...*, pp. 407–414.

relationships in the future<sup>13</sup>. Infants who are avoidantly-attached are more likely to have trouble forming stable relationships in the future<sup>14</sup>, which can impact their family lives.

Although there is scarce empirical evidence about the effects of MSA levels on depressive symptomatology and vice-versa, heightened levels of MSA could increase the risk of developing depressive symptomatology<sup>15</sup>. If this theory is true, then heightened levels of MSA impact mothers' mental health, which could prevent them from properly functioning as mothers, women, and employees. However, it must be noted that it can also be true that depressive symptomatology and MSA may have common characteristics and behaviours, and the two could be most accurately described as co-occurring.

Heightened levels of MSA can lower levels of childcare satisfaction. This could result in mothers spending more time and enduring more hardship when choosing and locating appropriate childcare. Trouble finding childcare could affect mothers' employment decisions and prevent from either planning to return to employment or actually returning.

It would be in the interest of family policy to reduce the negative effects of heightened levels of MSA by implementing tools that could lower MSA levels. The effects of heightened levels of MSA can be detrimental to a mother's role as a mother, wife, employee, and citizen, and with regards to her functioning and, in turn, her family.

### **3. Family Policy Tools: Childcare and Family Benefits, Child Tax Benefits and Tax Exemptions, Maternal Leave Benefits**

Family policy encompasses all actions and instruments that the state offers to ensure the best quality of living for families. The dominating tool of family support offered by governments is in the form of monetary benefits. Depending on the location, these benefits are either issued based on family needs and employment status, or regardless of family income and employment. Regardless of the exact specifics of the benefit system, these benefits provide a rather significant

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<sup>13</sup> Hock E., Schirtzinger M.B., *Maternal separation...*, pp. 93–102.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

supplementary contribution to family income; in other words, childcare and family benefits increase the families' income and better the financial situation<sup>16</sup>.

An alternative approach of a family support system put in place to improve the financial situation of families and children is the provision of a child benefit through a country's tax system<sup>17</sup>. Many countries (nearly all OECD countries) have some type of tax exemptions in various amounts for families with dependents<sup>18</sup>. Although sometimes tax credits are of benefit only to those who pay taxes in the first place and are of highest value to those who earn the highest incomes, child tax benefits are, nonetheless, a form of increasing the family's income and improving their financial situation.

Maternal leave benefits and parental leave benefits are a form of family policy tool, which substitute for the mother's normal income when she is absent from work following childbirth. Following childbirth, a woman receives maternal leave benefits (usually in the form of some sort of percentage of her normal monthly wage) for a specific period of time postpartum<sup>19</sup>. Similarly to childcare and family benefits and child tax benefits, maternal leave benefits affect the financial situation of families. However, so far as the former three are additions to the family's budget, maternal leave benefits are a substitution for what the mother would earn if she were not on maternal leave caring for her infant. With access to paid maternal leave benefits, the mother is able to sustain at least part of her income while she provides care for her child; her financial situation is likely to remain relatively stable for the duration of time she cares for her infant.

The above-mentioned family policy tools serve to improve the family's financial situation. A mother, in a better financial situation, has higher socioeconomic position, which is correlated with lower levels of MSA. If mothers who have higher income and who see their financial situation as better have lower MSA levels, family policy tools, which increase income and improve the family's financial situation, could indirectly lower levels of MSA.

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<sup>16</sup> **Kamerman S.B.**, *Childcare and family benefits: Policies of six industrialized countries*, Monthly Labor Review 1986/103, pp. 23–28.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> **Wennemo I.**, *The Development of Family Policy A Comparison of Family Benefits and Tax Reductions for Families in 18 OECD Countries*, Acta Sociologica 1992/35, pp. 201–217.

<sup>19</sup> **Rahn S.L., Burch H.A.**, *Paid Maternal and Parental Leave Legislation and Primary Prevention*, The Social Policy Journal 2002/1(3), pp. 75–86.

## 4. Study

The current study investigates the contribution of mothers' income levels and subjective ratings of their financial situation to heightened levels of MSA. It is hypothesized that both, mothers with lower income and mothers who rate their financial situation as worse, will experience higher levels of MSA.

## 5. Sample

Mothers were recruited through fan pages on Facebook and other forums related to motherhood, as well as, by means of the snowball method. In this method data was collected from a few members of a target population that was available and easy to locate, and those individuals were asked to provide information on other members of this population<sup>20</sup>. Respondents had to satisfy the following three conditions:

1. Have a child between 1–12 months, this being the first child.
2. Be on maternity leave.
3. Be in a relationship and live with a partner.

The final sample consisted of 153 mothers. The mean age of respondents was 28.4 years old. 116 of the women had higher education, 31 had secondary education (średnie), 5 had secondary-professional education (zawodowe), and one respondent had elementary (gimnazjalne) education. The mean age of infants in this study was 4.5 months with a majority of infants between 9 and 10 months old.

## 6. Measures

All measures were mother report. This study was conducted with the aid of an online questionnaire created on [www.ankietka.pl](http://www.ankietka.pl). The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions.

*Maternal Separation Anxiety* The first three questions of the questionnaire were taken directly from the MSAS – General MSA<sup>21</sup> and translated into Polish. Levels of MSA were calculated according to the rules in the original MSAS; scores on the first three questions of the questionnaire were summed up and divided by 3 individually for each mother to yield a level of MSA between 7–35.

<sup>20</sup> **Babbie E.**, *Badania Społeczne w Praktyce*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2005, p. 511.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

*Income* The questionnaire consisted of a question asking the mother to rate her net income per family member. Mother's mean net income per family member was 2063.73 polish złoty. Most respondents said that their net income per family member was between 1000–1500 polish złoty.

*Subjective Rating of Financial Situation* In addition to objective measures of net income per family member the questionnaire asked mothers to rate their financial situation on a scale of 1–5 (5 – Very good, 4 – Good, 3 – Average, 2 – Bad, 1 – Very Bad).

## 7. Results

All results were analyzed using IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

*Income* Consistent with previous findings, the study showed that the higher the net income per family member the lower the mothers' level of MSA; Mothers who rated their income higher had lower scores on the MSAS. The correlation between income and MSA level was relatively small, negative but significant at the 0.05 level of a 2-tailed analysis.

TABELA 1: *MSA level and Net Income per Family Member*

<b>Correlations</b>			
		MSA level	Net Income per Family Member
MSA level	Pearson Correlation	1	–0,174*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0,031
	N	153	153
Net Income per Family Member	Pearson Correlation	–0,174*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,031	
	N	153	153

\* indicates that the correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: own study, results taken from 153 questionnaires and analyzed using IBM SPSS.

*Mothers' Subjective Rating of Financial Situation and Levels of MSA* Results of this analysis showed that mothers' subjective ratings' of their financial situations were correlated with their MSA levels. Mothers who reported their subjective financial situation, as worse had higher levels of MSA. The correlation between

mother's subjective ratings of their financial situation and MSA levels was relatively small, negative but significant at the 0.01 level of a 2-tailed analysis.

TABELA 2: *MSA level and Subjective Rating of Financial Situation*

Correlations			
		MSA level	Subjective Rating of Financial Situation
MSA level	Pearson Correlation	1	-0,241*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0,003
	N	153	153
Subjective Rating of Financial Situation	Pearson Correlation	-0,241*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,003	
	N	153	153

\* indicates that the correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: own study, results taken from 153 questionnaires and analyzed using IBM SPSS.

Both sets of results show that mothers' financial situations are correlated with MSA levels. Although the correlations were small they were relevant and they confirmed previous findings on this topic. Mothers with higher levels of MSA rated their actual financial situation and their subjective financial situation as worse.

## 8. Socioeconomic Disadvantage and MSA

There are many factors that influence levels of MSA such as mother's education and maturity<sup>22</sup> infant age and temperament<sup>23</sup>. Aside from infant and mother characteristics, it is important to consider the impact of socioeconomic

<sup>22</sup> **Fein G., Gariboldi A., Boni R.**, *Antecedents of maternal separation anxiety*, Merrill-Palmer Quarterly 1993/39, pp. 481–495; **Blunk E.M., Williams S.W.**, *A comparison of adolescent and adult mothers' maternal separation anxiety*, Social Behavior and Personality 1999/27, pp. 281–288; **Cooklin A.R., Lucas N., Strazdins L., Westrupp E., Giallo R., Canteford L., Nicholson J.M.**, *Heightened Maternal Separation Anxiety in the Postpartum: The role of Socioeconomic Disadvantage*, Journal of Family Issues 2013/XX(X), pp. 1–23.

<sup>23</sup> **Mayseless O., Scher A.**, *Mother's attachment concerns regarding spouses and infant's temperament as modulators of maternal separation anxiety*, Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines 2000/41, pp. 917–925; **McBride S., Belsky J.**, *Characteristics...*, pp. 407–414; **Hock E., Schirtzinger M.B.**, *Maternal separation...*, pp. 93–102.

disadvantage on levels of MSA because individual existence and development is embedded in broader social-ecological contexts<sup>24</sup>. Socioeconomic disadvantage can be classified as a set of social characteristics such as poor neighbourhood quality, low-income level, low socioeconomic position and lower job satisfaction. There is evidence that high levels of MSA are a result of socioeconomic disadvantage<sup>25</sup>.

Recent research has shown that socioeconomic disadvantage is associated with inhospitable environments characterized, among others, by low income and residing in a poor quality neighbourhood<sup>26</sup>. Cooklin et al. (2013) theorized that feeling a higher than usual amount of distress and anxiety about separation from an infant may be appropriate when the environment is not seen as safe and stimulating. A mother who is socioeconomically disadvantaged is likely to live in a poorer quality neighbourhood, and have a lower socioeconomic position, which may cause her to worry more about the safety and wellbeing of her children.

Cooklin et al. (2013) compared levels of MSA to factors such as socioeconomic position (a rank of each family's relative socioeconomic position based on parental education, income and occupational prestige; families were ranked as either low, medium or high in socioeconomic position) and neighbourhood quality (assessed by asking a single question about how they feel about their neighbourhood as a place to bring up children)<sup>27</sup>. The results of the study showed that mothers of low socioeconomic position reported higher MSA levels compared with mothers in the medium socioeconomic position and in the high socioeconomic position.

Characteristics of the social context seem to influence how a mother reacts to being separated from her infant; how a mother behaves is an interaction between her personality and the situation she finds herself in<sup>28</sup>. This study identifies, isolates and focuses on two measures of socioeconomic position. Mothers were asked about their net incomes per family member (objective earnings) and their subjective ratings of their financial situation. Socioeconomic disadvantage showed to be related to higher levels of MSA and since income and subjective financial situation is related with socioeconomic position it can be theorized that income levels will also be related to MSA levels.

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<sup>24</sup> **Bronfenbrenner U.**, *Ecology of the family as context for human development: Research Perspectives*, *Developmental Psychology* 1986/22, pp. 723–742.

<sup>25</sup> **Cooklin A.R.** et al., *Heightened Maternal...*, pp. 1–23.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

## 9. Conclusion

In this study, mothers were asked about their income, and their levels of MSA were measured. Mothers who had lower net income per family member had higher levels of MSA than mothers with higher net incomes. Furthermore, mothers who had higher levels of MSA also perceived their financial situation as worse than mothers with lower levels of MSA. As mentioned earlier socioeconomic disadvantage is associated with inhospitable environments characterized, among others, by low income<sup>29</sup>. This study shows that both the objective family earnings and subjective rating of the family's financial situation, which affect the family's socioeconomic position, can affect MSA levels.

It can be theorized that low income and poor rating of financial situation heighten levels of MSA. Family policy tools, which can increase the family's income and improve their financial situation, place families in a better socioeconomic position and could indirectly lower levels of MSA. Therefore, receiving help from the government, in the form of monetary benefits, tax benefits and exemptions or maternity leave benefits for the time the mother is absent from work, improves the financial situation of the family and also allows the family or the mother to feel supported (being able to rely on the government for financial aid could affect the subjective feeling mothers have about the situation of their family).

As mentioned earlier, higher levels of MSA can have negative consequences for the mother, for her relationship with her infant and partner, and can affect her overall well-being. Mothers with higher levels of MSA are likely to have more trouble finding appropriate childcare which affects their employment decisions, they may foster avoidantly-attached relationships with their infants, which can affect the infant's ability to form stable, healthy relationships in the future, and they are at a higher risk of developing depressive symptomatology<sup>30</sup>. Therefore, by implementing family policy tools that aim to improve the financial situation of families, family policy is indirectly acting to lower MSA levels, and improve the well being and functioning of mothers and, in turn, their families.

One other important thing to mention is that socioeconomic disadvantage is associated with worse mental health for mothers<sup>31</sup>. Poorer mental health

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>30</sup> **McBride S.L.**, *Maternal moderators...*, pp. 53–69; **Buffardi L.C.**, **Edwins C.J.**, *Child-care satisfaction...*, pp. 84–96; **Hock E.**, **DeMeis D.K.**, *Depression...*, pp. 41–55; **Hock E.**, **Schirtzinger M.B.**, *Maternal separation...*, pp. 93–102; **McBride S.**, **Belsky J.**, *Characteristics...*, pp. 407–414; **Stifter C.A.**, **Coulehan C.M.**, **Fish M.**, *Linking employment...*, pp. 1451–1460; **Wille D.E.**, *Longitudinal analysis...*, pp. 216–233.

<sup>31</sup> **Cooklin A.R.**, et al., *Heightened Maternal...*, p. 25.

may enhance levels of anxiety and, in turn, levels of MSA. So far as there is scarce empirical evidence about the relationship between MSA and depressive symptomatology, it can be added that family policy tools, which increase income and improve the socioeconomic position of families, could also improve mental health in mothers. Therefore, even if further studies negate the theory that heightened MSA levels increase the risk of developing depressive symptomatology, perhaps, increasing socioeconomic position with the aid of various family policy tools could, on its own, improve mothers mental health (this is a topic for another study). In addition to lowering MSA levels family policy tools, which improve the family's financial situation, could also have other benefits for the well being of the family.

In conclusion, this study showed that there is a relationship between socioeconomic position and levels of MSA. Family policy tools, which improve the socioeconomic position of the family, can lower MSA levels. Lowering MSA levels decreases the negative consequences that increased MSA levels can have on families and mothers, and improve the overall well being of families.

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### MATCZYNY LĘK SEPARACYJNY W KONTEKŚCIE POLITYKI RODZINNEJ: OBIEKTYWNA I SUBIEKTYWNA OCENA SYTUACJI FINANSOWEJ

(Streszczenie)

Matczyzny lęk separacyjny (MSA) to nadmierny lęk u matki, koncentrujący się na sytuacji oddzielenia od swojego dziecka. We wcześniejszych badaniach można zauważyć, że podwyższony poziom MSA u matek jest spowodowany, między innymi, trudną sytuacją społeczno-ekonomiczną. Cechy środowiska takie jak: złe warunki mieszkalne, niski poziom zarobków, niska pozycja społeczno-ekonomiczna i małe zadowolenie z zatrudnienia mają wpływ na poziom MSA u kobiet. Badanie przedstawione w artykule potwierdza związek pomiędzy obiektywną sytuacją finansową matek i subiektywną oceną sytuacji finansowej matek a poziomem MSA. Artykuł przedstawia wyniki badań ilościowych przeprowadzonych przez autorkę. W badaniach wzięły udział 153 kobiety. Wyniki badań pokazują, że kobiety, które oceniały swoją subiektywną i obiektywną sytuację finansową jako gorszą, miały podwyższone poziomy MSA w porównaniu do kobiet w lepszej sytuacji finansowej. Autorka pokazuje jak różne instrumenty polityki rodzinnej mogą przyczynić się do poprawienia sytuacji finansowej matek, co mogłoby spowodować niższe poziomy MSA u kobiet i uchronić je przed złymi skutkami podwyższonego poziomu MSA.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Matczyzny Lęk Separacyjny; polityka rodzinna; pozycja społeczno-ekonomiczna