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How Mothers' Relational Memory and Work Status Shape Parenting Cognition: Effects on Theory of Mind and Behavioural Understanding

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how mothers' relational memories with their own parents, together with current employment status, influence their cognitive and emotional functioning in parenting. Four hundred Japanese mothers of children aged 3–6 years participated. Relational memory was assessed and factor analysis identified three dimensions: Supportive Relationship, Trust/Disclosure, and Negative Emotion (KMO = 0.86; variance explained = 65.2%). Parenting cognition was measured via behavioural understanding, theory of mind tasks (False Belief and Director tasks), and cognitive flexibility. Full-time employed mothers reported more supportive and trust-based memories, while homemakers showed higher levels of negative emotional memories. Regression analyses revealed that supportive memories significantly predicted theory of mind and flexibility ($\beta = .52-.53$), while negative emotions were associated with emotional dysregulation and diminished perspective-taking. The findings highlight the enduring influence of early relational experiences and occupational engagement on maternal socio-cognitive capacities. Implications are discussed for interventions that integrate reflective parenting education and support maternal social participation to promote positive parenting practices across diverse cultural contexts.

Keywords: emotion regulation; maternal employment; mentalisation; perspective-taking; socio-cognitive functioning