The social default mode network mediates the impact of infant regulatory problems on adult social-emotional problems

Josef Bäuml1,2, Nicole Baumann3, Mihai Avram1,2, Satja Mulej Bratec1,2, Linda Breemar6, Maria Berndt1,2, Bilgin Ayten3, Julia Jaeki3,5, Dieter Wolke3,4, Christian Sorg1,2,7

Introduction
Infant regulatory problems (RPs), i.e. problems with crying, feeding, and/or sleeping, are associated with social-emotional problems in childhood1,2,3. It is unclear, however, whether these problems persist into adulthood and if so, what brain systems may mediate them. The default mode network (DMN) supports both interoceptive regulation and social-emotional abilities4. We hypothesized that adults with a history of infant RPs show more social-emotional problems, which are mediated by functional alterations of the DMN.

Materials and methods
Participants
• Were recruited as part of the Bavarian Longitudinal Study
• Adults with and without a history of multiple and/or persistent RPs (0 age: 28 y, 50% males)

Social-emotional problems
• Measured by the Young Adult Self Report (YASR)
• Outcome: T-scores
• Collected in 79 RPs and 254 non-RPs adults

Default Mode Network
• Measured by resting-state functional magnetic resonance imaging
• Outcome: Intrinsic functional connectivity (iFC), Z-scores
• DMN iFC based on seed-based partial correlations using functionally defined seeds derived from independent component analysis
• Collected in a subset of participants: 49 RPs and 71 non-RPs adults

Results
Figure 1. Individuals with a history of infant RPs show more social-emotional problems in adulthood than those without RPs. Bar plots show mean T-scores with 95% confidence intervals (p < 0.05, Bonferroni adjusted)

A. The DMN in adults with and without a history of infant RPs

B. Between-group differences in DMN iFC overlap with the social DMN

C. Dose effect of infant RPs on DMN iFC

Figure 2. RPs-related iFC differences in DMN overlap with the social-DMN5 and are associated with social-emotional problems. A. One-sample t-tests of the DMN (p<0.05, FWE-corrected). B. Two-sample t-test (p<0.05, FWE-corrected). C. One-way ANCOVA within adults with infant RPs. Bar plots show mean residual DMN iFC with 95%-confidence intervals.

D. Spearman’s rank correlation; r = 0.42, p = 0.006

Figure 3. Decreased DMN iFC in the precuneus and medial prefrontal cortex mediates the association between infant RPs and avoidant personality traits. Displayed are the total effect (c), direct effect (c') and indirect effect (a*b) for the triangular relationship of infant RPs (left), adult avoidant personality traits (right) and residual DMN iFC (middle).

Conclusions
Results provide evidence that individuals with a history of infant RPs have more social-emotional problems in adulthood, which are mediated by functional alterations of the social-DMN. Those individuals with both multiple and persistent RPs show most pronounced DMN iFC decreases in adulthood, suggesting a dose effect of infant RPs on DMN iFC.

The persistency of RPs and the social-DMN may be potential targets to attenuate long-lasting social-emotional problems in individuals with a history of infant RPs.

References

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Contact: josef.baeuml@tum.de