

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Association between parents' sense of family belonging and parent–infant attachment: Implications for early family relationships

DOI: 10.29063/ajrh2026/v30i17.6

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Abstract

This cross-sectional correlational study examined the association between parents' sense of family belonging and parent–infant attachment. Data were collected from 422 mothers and 422 fathers using a survey form, the Maternal Attachment Scale, the Father–Infant Attachment Scale, and the Family Belonging Scale. The mean Maternal Attachment Scale score among mothers was 97.84 ± 7.78 , and the mean total score on the Father–Infant Attachment Scale among fathers was 70.40 ± 11.30 . Mean total scores on the Family Belonging Scale did not differ significantly between mothers and fathers. Family belonging was positively and significantly correlated with both maternal attachment and father–infant attachment. Moderation analysis indicated that father–infant attachment moderated the relationship between mothers' family belonging and maternal attachment. Overall, these findings suggest that both mothers' and fathers' sense of belonging is an important factor in parent–infant attachment. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2026; 30 [17]: 71-80).

Keywords : Family belonging, parent–infant attachment, maternal attachment, father–infant attachment, midwifery

Résumé

Cette étude corrélationnelle transversale a examiné l'association entre le sentiment d'appartenance familiale des parents et l'attachement parent-enfant. Les données ont été recueillies auprès de 422 mères et 422 pères à l'aide d'un questionnaire, de l'échelle d'attachement maternel, de l'échelle d'attachement père-enfant et de l'échelle d'appartenance familiale. Le score moyen à l'échelle d'attachement maternel était de $97,84 \pm 7,78$ chez les mères, et le score moyen à l'échelle d'attachement père-enfant était de $70,40 \pm 11,30$ chez les pères. Les scores moyens à l'échelle d'appartenance familiale ne différaient pas significativement entre les mères et les pères. L'appartenance familiale était positivement et significativement corrélée à la fois à l'attachement maternel et à l'attachement père-enfant. L'analyse de modération a indiqué que l'attachement père-enfant modérait la relation entre le sentiment d'appartenance familiale des mères et l'attachement maternel. Globalement, ces résultats suggèrent que le sentiment d'appartenance, tant chez les mères que chez les pères, est un facteur important de l'attachement parent-enfant. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2026; 30 [17]: 71-80).

Mots-clés: Appartenance familiale, attachement parent-enfant, attachement maternel, attachement père-enfant, sage-femme

Introduction

Parenthood occupies an important place in human life and differs from other social roles in that it continues throughout the lifespan.¹ Recent longitudinal and systematic studies involving first-time parents indicate that parent–infant attachment begins during pregnancy and continues to develop dynamically during the first months after birth.²⁻⁴ Historically, research on early attachment has focused primarily on the mother–infant relationship; however, growing evidence suggests

that fathers' attachment to their infants is also crucial for child outcomes and family functioning.^{5,6} These findings underscore the importance of conceptualising parent–infant attachment as a process in which both mothers and fathers play active and complementary roles. Although mothers and fathers may show different attachment styles, a key feature of secure parent–child attachment is warm, responsive caregiving that fosters the infant's sense of security and belonging.⁶⁻¹⁰ A sense of belonging is closely associated with an individual's psychological and

social functioning and is more than a transient emotion; it reflects the experience of being connected to another person, sharing with them, and investing time and effort in the relationship.^{11–14} The literature indicates that parents' sense of family belonging, developed within their families of origin, is among the factors that influence the maintenance of parent–infant attachment relationships. Accordingly, the family constitutes a primary context in which one of the most fundamental human needs—a sense of belonging—can be fulfilled.^{12,14} Studies further suggest that during the first postpartum year—when mother–infant and father–infant attachment may be particularly salient—parents may begin to reflect their sense of family belonging in their relationships with their infants.^{11,12,14}

Fonagy *et al.* (1991) proposed a theoretical framework that supports this view. Within this framework, parental mentalising capacity refers to the parent's ability to understand the infant's mind as a separate inner world and to reflect this understanding back to the infant. The framework also emphasises that parents' past attachment experiences may contribute to the intergenerational transmission of attachment and may shape how parents convey a sense of belonging to their infant.¹⁵ In the same framework, attachment is viewed as showing continuity, while individuals' sense of belonging in adulthood may vary depending on contextual and developmental factors.^{14,15} This dynamic view highlights the need to examine parent–infant attachment not only at dyadic (mother–infant, father–infant) but also at triadic (mother–father–infant) levels from the earliest period.^{16–18}

In summary, parents' sense of family belonging within the family of origin may serve as a bridge between past and present relationships and may either facilitate or hinder the development of warm, secure attachment with one's own infant.^{19,20} Therefore, to support the simultaneous and ongoing process of parent–infant attachment in the postnatal period, it is important to recognise parents' relational contexts, understand their sense of family belonging, and provide care that is responsive to family needs.^{4,21,22} From a midwifery perspective, understanding parents' sense of family belonging

and attachment histories is essential for delivering truly family-centred care and for identifying parents who may require additional support to establish secure attachment with their infant. Midwives accompany families throughout pregnancy, birth, and the first postnatal year and are responsible not only for clinical safety but also for promoting early emotional connection and secure attachment as part of holistic, relationship-centred care.^{22–24} However, further evidence is needed to clarify how parents' sense of family belonging relates to mother–infant and father–infant attachment within the context of pregnancy and childbirth processes. In response to this gap, the present study aimed to examine the relationship between parents' sense of family belonging and mother–infant and father–infant attachment.

Methods

Study design and participants

This cross-sectional study was conducted at Family Health Centers No. 1, 4, and 10 affiliated with the Amasya Central Community Health Center in northern Türkiye between August 4, 2020, and February 4, 2021.

The universe in this research consisted of 1421 women who gave birth while registered at the relevant family health centres. The known universe sample formula was used in the sample calculation. The calculation, made with a 95% confidence interval and a 4% acceptable margin of error, yielded the number 1421, and it was therefore decided to include a total of 844 people, namely, 422 mothers and 422 fathers, in three family health centres in the scope of the research. The haphazard sampling method was used to select the couples to reach the sample number.

Parents were eligible to participate in the study if they were aged 18 years or older, had a healthy singleton infant aged between 3 and 12 months, had no maternal or fetal complications, had no diagnosed psychiatric disorder, and had no problems speaking, understanding, or communicating in Turkish. The characteristics of the parents participating in the study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive characteristics of couples

	Women	Men
<i>Education</i>		
Elementary or secondary school	180 (42.7)	149 (35.3)
College or university	242 (57.3)	273 (64.7)
<i>Employment Status</i>		
Employed	229 (54.3)	396 (93.8)
Unemployed	193 (45.7)	26 (6.2)
<i>Socioeconomic Status</i>		
Below average	99 (23.5)	102 (24.2)
Average	252 (59.7)a	217 (51.4)b
Above average	71 (16.8)a	103 (24.4)b
<i>Place of Residence</i>		
City (>100,000 citizens)	55 (13)	61 (14.5)
City (<100,000 citizens)	27 (6.4)	42 (10)
Rural area	340 (80.6)	319 (75.6)
<i>Types of Family</i>		
Nuclear family	373 (88.4)	357 (84.6)
Extended family	49 (11.6)	65 (15.4)
<i>Last Baby's Planning Status</i>		
Planned	314 (74.4)	290 (68.7)
Unplanned	108 (25.6)	132 (31.3)
<i>Last Baby's Gender</i>		
Girl	251 (59.5)	223 (52.8)
Boy	171 (40.5)	199 (47.2)
<i>Age</i>	29.54 ± 5.12	31.07 ± 6.01
<i>Marriage Age</i>	23.90 ± 3.71	25.50 ± 4.30
<i>Year of Marriage</i>	5.63 ± 4.26	5.81 ± 4.68
<i>Number of Siblings</i>	3.07 ± 1.32	3.08 ± 2.20
<i>Age of First Parenthood</i>	25.81 ± 4.10	28.00 ± 4.82

* frequency (percentage), mean ± s. Deviation.

Data collection and study tools

The data for this study were collected face-to-face using the survey form (for women and men) Mother-Infant Attachment Scale, the Father-Infant Attachment Scale, and the Family Belonging Scale.

Survey form (Women): 14 questions including sociodemographic and obstetric information about women.

Survey form (Men): 12 questions including sociodemographic and introductory information about men

Maternal attachment scale (MAS) : The MAS was developed by Mary E. Muller in 1994 to measure the maternal love bond between the mother and the baby after birth.²⁵ Muller created the questions of the scale in line with the literature examining maternal attachment and maternal adaptation. The

Turkish validity and reliability study of the scale was conducted by Kavlak and Şirin in 2009. The MAS is a 4-point Likert-type scale consisting of 26 items where 1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often, and 4 = always. The scores obtained from the scale vary from 26 to 104. A high score on this scale indicates that maternal attachment is also high. The scale is applied to mothers whose babies are at least 1 month old. In the study by Kavlak and Şirin (2009), the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of the scale is 0.83.²⁶ In this study, the Cronbach's α value of the MAS was found to be 0.94.

Father–infant attachment scale: The father–infant attachment scale was developed by Condon and colleagues in 2008 to assess postpartum father–infant attachment.²⁷ Güleç and Kavlak adapted the scale to Turkish society in 2013.²⁸ The scale consists of three sub-dimensions, namely, 'patience

and tolerance', 'pleasure in interaction', and 'love and pride', and 19 items. Each item of the scale is scored between 1 and 5 points. The lowest score that can be obtained from the scale is 19, while the highest score is 95. Twelve items in the scale (4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16) are reverse-scoring. High scores indicate high attachment. The scale can be applied to fathers who have babies aged at least 3 months. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale developed by Condon and colleagues (2008) to assess father–infant attachment was found to be 0.81 at 6 months and 0.78 at 12 months. In this study, the Cronbach's α value of the Father–Infant Attachment Scale was found to be 0.86.

The family belonging scale: A 5-point Likert-type measurement tool developed by Mavili et al. (2014) to measure individuals' attachment to their families.¹¹ The scale consists of two sub-dimensions: self-attachment and family attachment. It consists of a total of 17 items, 12 in the self-attachment sub-dimension and five in the family-attachment sub-dimension. The scale items are scored as 1 = completely disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, and 5 = completely agree. The scale contains 13 positive and four negative items (5, 7, 9, and 12). The negative items are reversed, and total scores for sub-dimensions and the entire scale are calculated. The total score that can be obtained from the scale varies between 17 and 85 points. As the total score increases, so does the level of family belonging. The scale consists of two subscales: self-belonging and family belonging. The self-belonging subscale reflects the individual's personal sense of belonging to the family, whereas the family belonging subscale reflects the sense of belonging, acceptance, and support experienced from the family environment. The calculated Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of the scale is 0.94. In this study, the Cronbach's α value of the Family Belonging Scale was found to be 0.91 for women and 0.87 for men.

Statistical analysis

The data were analysed with IBM SPSS V23. Compliance with normal distribution was examined with kurtosis and skewness values. The analysis results are presented as mean $\pm$ s. deviation and

median (minimum–maximum) for quantitative data and as frequency and percentage for categorical data. The Mann–Whitney U test was used to compare data that were not normally distributed according to gender, and an independent two-sample t test was used to compare normally distributed data. The Kruskal–Wallis test was used to compare data that were not normally distributed according to three or more groups, and multiple comparisons were examined with Dunn's test. Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationship between data that were not normally distributed, and Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationship between data that were normally distributed. The Process Makro v3.5 package developed by Hayes was used to examine the moderating effect of father–infant attachment and maternal attachment.³⁰ Significance level was taken as $p < 0.050$.

Ethical consideration

Before the research began, approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the relevant university Non-Pharmaceutical Non-Interventional Clinical Research (OMÜ KAİK 2020/425), and written permission to conduct of the research in the specified places was obtained. Before the data collection tools were applied in the research, the purpose of the research and the forms to be used were introduced to the parents. The participants were informed that the obtained data would be confidential and would not be used outside the scope of the research; their verbal consent was obtained, and their voluntary participation was ensured. Scientific publication ethics and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki were considered in the planning and writing of the research.

Results

The findings of the study regarding parents' family belonging and parent–infant attachment are presented below. Women had significantly higher self-belonging scores than men (52.56 ± 7.50 vs. 51.04 ± 7.32 , $p < 0.001$). Similarly, women's total Family Belonging Scale scores were significantly higher than those of men (71.90 ± 10.79 vs. 70.43 ± 10.09 , $p = 0.041$). However, no statistically

Table 2: Comparison of the family belonging scale scores of women and men

	Women	Men	Test value	P
	52.56 ± 7.50	51.04 ± 7.32	7.5675	<0.001*
<i>Self-Belonging</i>	55.00 (14.00 – 60.00)	52.00 (17.00 – 60.00)		
	19.33 ± 3.92	19.39 ± 3.56	-0.211	0.833**
<i>Family-Belonging</i>	20.00 (7.00 – 25.00)	20.00 (8.00 – 25.00)		
<i>Family-Belonging</i>	71.90 ± 10.79	70.43 ± 10.09	2.043	0.041**
<i>Total</i>	74.00 (24.00 – 85.00)	71.50 (26.00 – 85.00)		

*Mann-Whitney U test, **Independent two-sample t-test, mean ± standard deviation, median (minimum – maximum)

Table 3: Correlation between the mean total and subscale scores of the Father-Infant Attachment Scale and the mean total and subscale scores of the Family Belonging Scale for men.

	Self-belonging		Family Belonging		Family Belonging total	
	r*	p	r**	P	r**	p
<i>Patience and Tolerance</i>	0.532	<0.001	0.364	<0.001	0.472	<0.001
<i>Pleasure in Interaction</i>	0.170	<0.001	0.044	0.369	0.139	0.004
<i>Love and Pride</i>	0.346	<0.001	0.120	0.013	0.277	<0.001
<i>Father-Infant Attachment Scale total</i>	0.423	<0.001	0.223	<0.001	0.357	<0.001

*Spearman's rho correlation coefficient, **Pearson correlation coefficient

significant gender difference was found in the family belonging subscale scores ($p = 0.833$) (Table 2). These findings suggest that mothers felt a stronger personal sense of belonging to their families than fathers, although both groups perceived the family environment and family-related experiences similarly.

As presented in Table 3, statistically significant positive correlations were found between the Family Belonging Scale total and subscale scores and the Father-Infant Attachment Scale total and subscale scores. In particular, higher self-belonging scores were moderately associated with higher levels of fathers' patience and tolerance toward their infants ($r = 0.532$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, total family belonging scores showed significant positive correlations with total father-infant attachment scores ($r = 0.357$, $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that fathers who reported a stronger sense of belonging to and within their families also tended to report stronger emotional attachment and more positive interactions with their infants.

As shown in Table 4, statistically significant positive correlations were found between Maternal Attachment Scale scores and self-belonging ($r = 0.487$, $p < 0.001$), family belonging ($r = 0.537$, $p < 0.001$), and total family belonging scores ($r = 0.545$, $p < 0.001$). The

strongest correlation was observed between maternal attachment and total family belonging scores. These findings suggest that mothers who reported a stronger overall sense of belonging to their family and greater support from the family environment also tended to report stronger attachment to their infants.

The regression model examining whether father-infant attachment moderates the relationship between mothers' family belonging and maternal-infant attachment was statistically significant ($F = 66.138$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 32.2% of the variance in maternal-infant attachment ($R^2 = 0.322$) (Table 5). Mothers' family belonging had a statistically significant positive effect on maternal-infant attachment ($\beta = 0.406$, $p < 0.001$). Although father-infant attachment did not have a statistically significant direct effect on maternal-infant attachment ($p = 0.850$), the interaction effect between mothers' family belonging and father-infant attachment was statistically significant ($\beta = -0.006$, $p = 0.022$), indicating a moderating effect.

Slope analysis further demonstrated that the positive relationship between maternal family belonging and maternal attachment remained statistically significant at low, medium, and high levels of father-infant attachment ($p < 0.001$ for all levels). However, the strength of this relationship gradually decreased as father-infant attachment

Table 4: Total correlation between women's mean scores on the Maternal Attachment Scale and the total and sub-dimension mean scores on the Family Belonging Scale

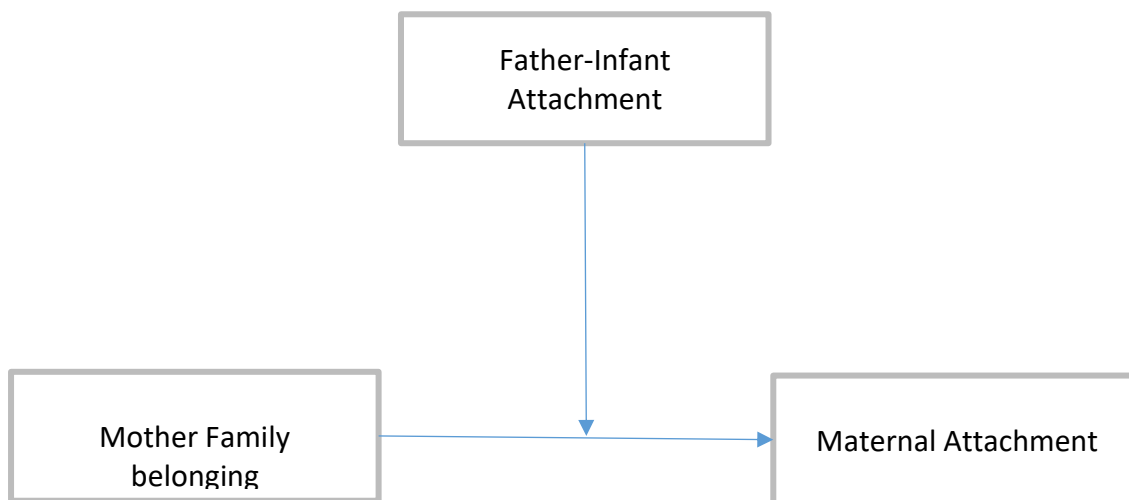
	Self-belonging		Family Belonging		Family Belonging total	
	r*	p	r**	p	r**	p
<i>Maternal Attachment Scale</i>	0.487	<0.001	0.537	<0.001	0.545	<0.001

Spearman's rho correlation coefficient

Table 5: Examining the moderating role of men's Father-Infant attachment levels in the relationship between women's Family Belonging and Maternal Infant Attachment levels

	β	S. Er.	t	p
<i>Constant</i>	97.894 (97.277 – 98.511)	0.314	311.923	<0.001
<i>Mother Family Belonging</i>	0.406 (0.349 – 0.464)	0.029	13.943	<0.001
<i>Father-Infant Attachment Scale</i>	-0.005 (-0.06 – 0.05)	0.028	-0.189	0.850
<i>Mother Family Belonging * Father-Infant Attachment Scale</i>	-0.006 (-0.012 - -0.001)	0.003	-2.305	0.022

F=66,138; p<0,001, R²=32,2%

**Figure 1:** Moderating effect of father–infant attachment on the relationship between maternal family belonging and maternal attachment

increased (Table 5; Figure 1). These findings suggest that the association between maternal family belonging and maternal attachment was stronger when father–infant attachment was lower and weaker when father–infant attachment was higher.

The moderating role of mothers' maternal attachment in the association between fathers' family belonging and father–infant attachment was not statistically significant ($p = 0.628$). Similarly,

maternal attachment did not have a statistically significant direct effect on father–infant attachment ($p = 0.636$).

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between parents' sense of family belonging and parent–infant attachment during the first postpartum year. The findings demonstrated that higher levels of

family belonging were associated with stronger maternal and paternal attachment to the infant. These results suggest that parents' perceptions of emotional connectedness and belonging within the family may play an important role in the development of early parent–infant relationships. To our knowledge, this is one of the first quantitative studies to investigate the association between family belonging and both maternal and paternal attachment during the postpartum period. The findings of this study are consistent with classical attachment theory, which suggests that early relationships with caregivers provide a secure base that shapes individuals' internal working models and their capacity to establish close relationships throughout life.³¹ In this context, a stronger sense of family belonging may reflect positive relational experiences within the family that contribute to the development of secure attachment representations. Previous studies have similarly shown that adults' attachment representations and relationships with their own parents are important predictors of parenting attitudes, parental sensitivity, and parent–infant bonding.^{1,9,12} Furthermore, meta-analytic evidence indicates that higher levels of parental mentalising and sensitivity are associated with more secure infant attachment.^{15,17,33,34}

Our findings also support Fonagy and colleagues' mentalising framework, which proposes that parents' capacity to understand and respond to their infant's emotional needs develops within the context of their own early attachment experiences.³⁵ In this respect, the present study extends the existing literature by suggesting that parents who report a stronger sense of family belonging may be more likely to establish secure and emotionally responsive relationships with their infants during the transition to parenthood.

One of the most important findings of this study is that father–infant attachment did not have a significant direct effect on mother–infant attachment; however, it significantly moderated the relationship between mothers' sense of family belonging and mother–infant attachment. Specifically, the positive association between maternal family belonging and mother–infant attachment became weaker as father–infant attachment increased. This finding suggests that the

influence of maternal family belonging on maternal attachment may vary according to the level of father–infant attachment. In other words, when fathers reported stronger attachment to their infants, maternal attachment appeared to be less strongly associated with mothers' perceptions of family belonging. These findings support the perspective that attachment processes within families are dynamic, relational, and interconnected rather than isolated individual characteristics.^{35–37} From a family systems perspective, stronger father–infant attachment may contribute to a more supportive emotional environment during the postpartum period, thereby indirectly influencing maternal attachment processes. This interpretation also highlights the importance of considering fathers' emotional engagement with their infants in interventions aimed at strengthening early parent–infant relationships.

In this context, the moderation findings of the present study may indicate that stronger father–infant attachment is associated with family relational processes that influence maternal attachment during the postpartum period. In other words, stronger father–infant attachment may function as a protective factor within the family context, reducing the extent to which maternal attachment is associated with mothers' perceptions of family belonging. This interpretation is consistent with previous evidence suggesting that father–infant attachment is shaped by various perinatal experiences and contributes independently to family functioning and parent–infant relationships.^{28,36,37}

From a maternity care perspective, midwives are well positioned to support the development of healthy family relationships during pregnancy and the postnatal period. By providing continuity of care and adopting a family-centred approach, midwives can help parents strengthen emotional connectedness, recognise family strengths, and navigate intergenerational family relationships in ways that promote a stronger sense of family belonging.^{4,8,23,32,38,39} International standards of midwifery practice also emphasise the importance of relationship-centred care and support for early parent–infant attachment as part of holistic maternity care.³⁹ Within this framework, midwives may encourage fathers or partners to participate in

antenatal visits, childbirth education, and parenting programmes. They may also create opportunities for parents to reflect on their experiences, expectations, and relationships within their families of origin.^{24,38,39}

Strengths and limitations

One of the strengths of this study is that it included both mothers and fathers and examined parent–infant attachment within a broader family belonging framework. In addition, the relatively large sample size strengthened the statistical analyses and enabled the simultaneous evaluation of maternal and paternal attachment processes. Another important strength is that this study addressed a relatively underexplored area by investigating the relationship between family belonging and parent–infant attachment during the postpartum period.

However, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study was conducted in family health centers within a single province in northern Türkiye, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations and cultural contexts. Second, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal inferences regarding the relationship between family belonging and parent–infant attachment. Finally, all data were collected using self-report measures, which may have increased the risk of reporting bias.

Implications for practice

The findings of this study highlight the importance of supporting both maternal and paternal involvement during the transition to parenthood. Assessing parents' sense of family belonging during antenatal and postnatal care may help healthcare professionals identify families who may require additional psychosocial support. Family-centred interventions that strengthen emotional connectedness and encourage fathers' involvement in infant care may contribute to healthier parent–infant relationships and family functioning.

From a policy perspective, the findings support the integration of family-centred psychosocial assessment and support strategies into routine maternal and child health services. Policies

that encourage fathers' participation in perinatal care and early parenting programmes may help strengthen family relationships and promote positive parent–infant attachment outcomes.

Conclusion

Our results highlight the importance of assessing not only the parents' existing bond with the infant but also their subjective sense of belonging within the family during the perinatal period. Within this context, our moderation findings suggest that stronger father–infant attachment may function as a protective factor within the family context, reducing the extent to which maternal attachment is associated with mothers' perceptions of family belonging. Midwives can play a crucial role in facilitating this process. Antenatally, they can actively invite fathers or partners to attend appointments, childbirth education and parenting classes, and create space to explore fathers' expectations, fears and experiences of their own families of origin. Prompting parents to reflect on their own early attachment histories and family belongings may further support this process. Additionally, future research could examine whether interventions aimed at increasing family belonging can improve parent–infant bonding and parental well-being during the critical first year after birth.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to sincerely thank the participants who volunteered their time to take part in this research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This research was not funded by any source

Contribution of authors

ST conceived and designed the study, analysed the data, drafted the manuscript, critically revised the manuscript, and approved the final version.

ET contributed to the study design, recruited participants, collected the data, assisted with data analysis, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data availability

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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