

ATTACHMENT AND AGGRESSION IN A CLINICAL ADOLESCENT SAMPLE

Obsuth, I., Luedemann, M., Peled, M., & Moretti, M. M.

Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia



Abstract

Attachment theory has been used to study the occurrence of aggression in adults. This study examines the relation between attachment patterns and aggression to others, self, and objects in a clinical adolescent sample. A total of 170 clinic-referred youth were rated on their attachment patterns and completed self-report measures assessing aggression. Multiple regression analyses revealed that preoccupied youth had the greatest vulnerability to act aggressively toward others. Fearful youth were more likely to act aggressively toward self compared to preoccupied and dismissing youth. Dismissingness for girls served as a protective factor against aggression toward self. No relation was observed between attachment patterns and aggression toward objects.

Introduction

Bowlby (1973) maintained that aggression in children and adolescents stems from a perceived threat of abandonment. Individuals who display aggression and violence toward others might fear being left alone and may lash out in an attempt to prevent others from leaving (Mayseless, 1991).

According to Bartholomew's (1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) two-dimensional, four category model of adult attachment, individuals with both fearful and preoccupied attachment patterns fear being rejected or abandoned by significant others. However, fearful and preoccupied individuals express their anxiety in different ways. Those with a preoccupied attachment pattern approach others in a desperate attempt to establish close relationships and avert abandonment. In contrast, individuals with a fearful attachment pattern may desire close relationships but avoid them due to an intense anxiety of being rejected or disappointed by others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Individuals with a preoccupied attachment style tend to be emotionally volatile, potentially leading to aggressive and violent behavior toward others. In fact, preoccupied attachment has been associated with aggression in dating relationships (Bookwala & Zdaniuk, 1998; Meesters & Muris, 2002). *It was hypothesized that preoccupied adolescents would express their fear of abandonment and anger through domineering acts of aggression toward others, whereas fearful adolescents would displace their anxiety and anger onto inanimate objects.* Such displacement onto objects was expected to stem from the tendency of fearful individuals to avoid rather than approach other people (e.g., to establish close relationships; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Both fearful and preoccupied attachment patterns were expected to predict aggression toward self (i.e., vulnerability to self-harm, measured by suicidal ideation). The rationale is that individuals with fearful and preoccupied attachment patterns share a negative view of self in that they perceive themselves as unworthy and unlovable (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Hence, individuals with a negative view of self would engage in more self-harming behaviors, or aggression toward self, as compared to individuals with a positive view of self (i.e., those exhibiting a secure or dismissing attachment style).

Lessard and Moretti (1998) found that adolescents with predominantly fearful or preoccupied attachment patterns were more likely to engage in suicidal ideation compared to adolescents with predominantly secure or dismissing attachment patterns. Further, severity of suicidal wish was correlated with elevated ratings of fearfulness and reduced ratings of dismissingness (Lessard & Moretti, 1998). In addition Adam, Sheldon-Keller, and West (1996) observed a relation between dismissing attachment among adolescents and an absence of past suicidality. *Therefore, it was hypothesized that a dismissing attachment pattern would act as a protective factor against self-harm.*

Summary of Hypotheses

Preoccupied attachment predicts vulnerability to act aggressively toward others.

Fearful attachment predicts aggression toward objects.

Fearful and Preoccupied attachments predict vulnerability for aggression toward self (i.e., self-harm).

Dismissing attachment acts as a protective factor against self-harm.

Method

Participants

Participants were youth admitted to the Response Program of the Maples Adolescent Treatment Centre in Burnaby, BC. Youth are referred to this facility primarily due to severe behavioural problems. 105 boys and 65 girls agreed to participate in the study. The mean age was 14.3 years ($SD = 1.47$).

Measures

Youth Self Report (YSR): Taps into emotional and behavioural functioning in various contexts (e.g., social, family, school). Of interest were specific items that were thought to measure aggression toward others, aggression toward objects, and aggression toward self.

Aggression toward Others Scale: e.g., I get in many fights; I physically attack people.

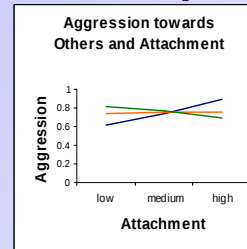
Aggression toward Objects Scale: e.g., I destroy my own things; I set fires.

Aggression toward Self: e.g., I deliberately try to hurt or kill myself.

Attachment Ratings: Each youth was involved in a semi-structured interview that included questions about attachment to primary caregivers. Interviews were coded based on Bartholomew's (1990, Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) four-category attachment model (secure, fearful, preoccupied, dismissing). Each youth received a score out of 9 for the 4 attachment styles based on the degree to which they fit the prototypes (1=no correspondence; 9=excellent fit).

Results

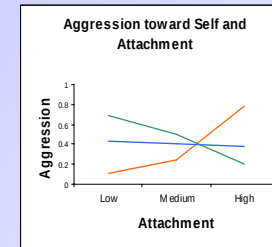
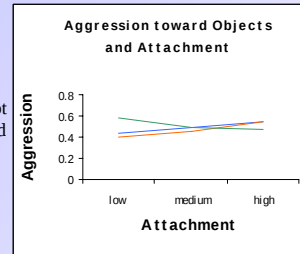
Legend: — Preoccupied
— Fearful
— Dismissing



As hypothesized, preoccupied attachment style predicted vulnerability to act aggressively towards others, $\beta = .182, p = .033$. Fearful and dismissing attachment style did not predict aggression toward others.

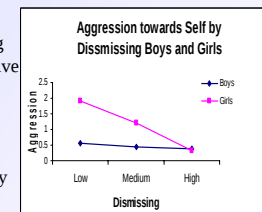
Legend: — Preoccupied
— Fearful
— Dismissing

Contrary to expectation, fearful attachment did not predict aggression toward objects. In fact, none of the attachment patterns predicted aggression toward objects.



As expected, fearful attachment predicted vulnerability to self-harm, $\beta = .245, p = .001$. Fearful adolescents are more prone to self harm than youth with any other attachment style.

As hypothesized, dismissing attachment acts as a protective factor against self-harm, however only for girls, $\beta = -.156, p = .47$. For girls, increasing dismissingness predicted lower vulnerability to self-harm.



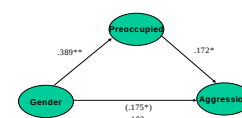
Discussion

Results suggest that attachment theory offers a useful framework for understanding aggression in a clinical sample of adolescents.

Awareness of attachment issues and their implications will enable therapists and other health-care professionals to better understand and address the origins of adolescents' aggression.

Preoccupied attachment mediated the relation between gender and aggression toward others.

Preoccupation as a Mediator between Gender and Aggression toward Others



Note: Numbers represent correlation coefficients.
*p<.05. **p<.001