

Introduction

Both attachment and affect regulation strategies develop and are shaped within the parent-child relationship. Depending on the quality of these relationships and interactions, children develop secure or insecure attachments (Bowlby, 1980) and adaptive or maladaptive affect regulation strategies (Thompson, 2001). The direct links between insecure attachment and a wide range of emotional (e.g., Shaw & Dallos, 2005) and behavioural difficulties, including aggression (e.g., Guttman-Steinmetz & Crowell, 2006), have been well documented. Similarly, maladaptive affect regulation strategies have been implicated in the development of a host of negative outcomes, including externalizing problems (e.g., Rydell, et al., 2003).

According to Mikulincer and Florian (2004), the relation between the attachment system, emotion regulation and mental health is the backbone of Bowlby's theoretical framework of attachment, yet little is known about how they interact, particularly in adolescence. In fact, very few researchers (e.g., Wei, et al., 2004) have examined their *combined impact* on outcome variables. In this study we examined the interactions among two insecure parent-adolescent attachment styles (fearful and preoccupied) and affect dyscontrol (or inability to regulate/control affect) as they relate to overt and relational aggression in adolescents.

We predicted that affect dyscontrol would interact with both attachment styles (fearfulness and preoccupation) to predict aggression. Based on our previous research we predicted that preoccupation would predict aggression in girls. Other aspects of the relations between affect dyscontrol, fearfulness, preoccupation and aggression were also explored.

Method

Participants

Participants were 120 adolescents (60 males; 60 females) aged 12 – 18 at high-risk for aggressive behaviour. Half were incarcerated at a youth custody centre and half were admitted to an assessment facility for mental health problems. Girls were on average 15.1 years of age, while boys were on average 15.5 years of age.

The majority identified themselves as Caucasian (65%), 22% as Aboriginal and 13% as other. 33% of youth indicated having had more than 5 foster placements, and 44% indicated having moved more than 10 times in their life.

Measures

Affect Regulation Checklist (ARC). The ARC (Moretti, 2003) is a 12-item measure developed to assess three components of affect regulation: Affect Dyscontrol, Suppression, and Reflection. Items are rated on a 3-point scale ranging from “not like me” to “a lot like me”. The Affect Dyscontrol subscale ($\alpha = .84$) was used in the current study as a measure of affect dysregulation.

Adolescent Attachment Interview (AAI). Youths were administered a 1- to 2-hour semi-structured interview. The interviews were coded by reliable coders, adhering to Bartholomew's coding system (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), well-validated for high risk youth (Scharfe, 2002). Based on youths' accounts of their experiences and feelings in family relationships, and the coherence of their accounts, the coders rated the interviews on the degree of correspondence to each of four attachment prototypes – secure (S), fearful (F), preoccupied (P) and dismissing (D) on a scale ranging from 1 to 9 (no to excellent correspondence with prototype).

Form-Function Aggression Measure (FFAM). The FFAM (Little, Jones, Henrich, & Hawley, 2003) is a self-report instrument that enables the examination of two forms of aggressive behaviour (overt and relational) and two functions of aggression (instrumental versus reactive). Items are rated on a 4-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “completely”. The Overt and Relational Aggression subscales were used in the current study ($\alpha s = .78$ & $.84$ respectively).

Results

Table 1. Zero order correlations.

	Discont.	Fearful	Preocc.	Overt A.	Rel. A.
Discont.		.12	.27*	.40**	.30*
Fearful	.09		-.59**	-.07	-.12
Preocc.	-.04	-.36*		.40**	.34**
Overt A.	.40**	.25*	-.14		.74**
Rel. A.	.20	.09	-.20	.52**	

Note: Correlations for girls appear above the diagonal; correlations for boys appear below the diagonal; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Hierarchical regression analyses were performed to test simple main effects and interaction effects. The pattern of findings was different for girls and boys:

Overt Aggression (OA):

For girls, preoccupation alone predicted OA ($p = .012$; $R^2 = .27$). For boys, OA was predicted by fearfulness ($p = .031$) and affect dyscontrol ($p = .022$; $R^2 = .24$).

Relational Aggression (RA):

There was a significant simple main effect for sex and RA in favour of girls.

For girls, RA was best predicted by preoccupation ($p = .067$; $R^2 = .20$). For boys, RA was best predicted by the interaction between fearfulness and affect dyscontrol ($p = .050$; $R^2 = .20$; as depicted in Figure 1).

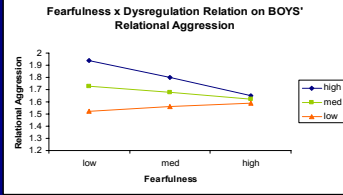


Figure 1. Attachment x Affect Dyscontrol in relation to Relational Aggression in Boys

Discussion

The pattern of findings differed significantly for girls and boys. Consistent with expectations, preoccupied attachment predicted both overt and relational aggression for girls. From an early age, girls are encouraged to attend to others' needs and are socialized to utilize relationships to self-regulate (Moretti & Higgins, 1999). Preoccupied attachment is characterized by a sense of chronic fear of abandonment associated with the active pursuit of closeness and reassurance from others. Therefore, in the context of their socialization, preoccupation in girls may be associated with an increased sensitivity to what happens in relationships, and girls may respond with aggression to perceived threats of abandonment or rejection.

In contrast, boys are encouraged toward independence from the opinions of others, and their identity may be less tied to intimate relationships (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997). Thus, the interaction of attachment insecurity (a vulnerability) with a more general affect dysregulation seems to predict aggression in boys.

These results must be considered in the context of the current sample, which includes youths with considerable trauma histories and relationship disruption.

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