

Attachment Patterns and the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT)

Attachment and Cognitive Complexity in Adolescents

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Introduction

Attachment theorists posit that children develop concepts of the self, others and relationships through repeated interactions with caregivers (Bowlby, 1973).

These internal working models, or attachment patterns, structure one's experiences and guide behavior (Farrar, Fasig, & Welch-Ross, 1997).

Attachment patterns influence the structure and content of autobiographical narratives (Bretherton, 1993) and thus may influence also the structure and content of 'fictional' narratives, such as those derived from the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT).

The present study focused on the relation between adolescents' attachment and the 'complexity of representations' dimension of the TAT (Westen, 1990; 1995). Westen's complexity dimension, based on object-relations theory, refers to the ability to differentiate the perspectives of self and other and to integrate various viewpoints, emotions and cognitions into a coherent narrative. The developmental sequence for complexity is believed to proceed from increasing differentiation to integration (Westen, 1990). Given that securely-attached compared to insecurely-attached adults produce more integrated autobiographical narratives (Kobak & Sceery, 1988), *we hypothesized that higher levels of adolescent attachment-security would predict higher scores of complexity on TAT narratives*

Discussion

The lack of association between secure attachment and complexity ran contrary to the hypothesis but is consistent with Harter's view that early to mid adolescence is marked by increased differentiation without integration (e.g., Harter, Bresnick, Bouchev, & Whitesell, 1997). Preoccupied attachment positively predicted complexity, although elevated complexity scores might not be a true reflection of adolescents' complexity. The scores in this sample ranged from 1.73 to 3.35. Based on the coding criteria, a score of 3 compared to 2 (out of 5) does not necessarily reflect more complexity. Rather, a score approximating 3 might reflect excessive differentiation, or fragmentation. Thus, increased preoccupation might be associated with increased fragmentation rather than complexity. The negative relation between dismissingness and complexity might stem from dismissing youths' disinterest in interpersonal integration and thinking about others' views in complex ways.

In this clinical sample, the complexity dimension might have tapped into varying degrees of differentiation (e.g., healthy differentiation vs. fragmentation) rather than integration, given that the scores fell in the low to mid range. Future studies could assess whether the ability to integrate differs among clinical and normative adolescent samples.

Method

Participants were 51 youth between the ages of 11 to 17 years ($M=14.66$, $SD=1.35$) admitted to a provincial assessment facility for emotional and behavioral difficulties. Youth were administered the *Thematic Apperception Test*, a projective test that requires creating stories from ambiguous pictures. The analyses focus on Westen's (1995) coding dimension of 'complexity of representations' (or 'cognitive structure of representations'). Attachment patterns were assessed using a modified version of Bartholomew's attachment interview (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Youth were rated on a 9-point scale according to how well they fit each prototypical attachment style (secure, fearful, preoccupied, dismissing).

Results

Contrary to the hypothesis, a zero-order correlation indicated that secure attachment did not predict cognitive complexity, $r(49)=.03$, $p=.86$. Fearful attachment also was not predictive of cognitive complexity, $r(49)=.14$, $p=.34$. However, preoccupied attachment was positively related, $r(49)=.45$, $p=.001$, and dismissing attachment was negatively related to complexity, $r(49)=-.42$, $p=.002$.

Relationship Representations in the TAT

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Introduction

Object relations theory (Greenberg, & Mitchell, 1983) and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) postulate that self-other representations emerge from early interactions between child and caregiver and these early representations subsequently serve as models in developing and viewing further relationships. Projective techniques, such as the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT, Murray, 1943), have been used to tap into these unconscious object relations. The current study focused on the relationship between attachment patterns and the quality of relationship representations assessed by Westen's (1995) object relations coding system for the TAT. Preoccupied individuals have a negative view of self but a positive view of other. They are highly dependent on others and tend to idealise them (Bartholomew, 1990). Thus, *we predict that individuals scoring high on preoccupied attachment will describe others positively and relationships as committed and well functioning*. On the other hand, dismissing individuals, who have a positive self-model and a negative other-model, openly criticise and avoid others, and find relationships uninteresting (Bartholomew, 1990). Thus, *we predict that individuals scoring high on dismissing attachment will describe others and the relationships with them as unimportant*.

Exploratory analyses was also carried out on those with predominantly fearful and secure attachment styles.

Conclusion

Findings support the link between attachment patterns and internalized self-other representations in interpersonal relationships. Youth with higher scores on the preoccupied attachment style described others and their relationships predominantly positively. They saw people as caring and loving and strongly expressed their interest in others. Those with higher scores on the dismissing attachment style demonstrated no interest in others, malevolence and self-serving relationships. Attachment theory provides valuable information on clinic-referred adolescents concerning their interpersonal relationships. Awareness of attachment issues and their implications will enable therapists and other health-care professionals to better understand and address the origins of adolescents' conduct problems.

Method

Fifty-one adolescents with conduct disorder between the ages of 11 and 17 ($M = 14.66$, $SD = 1.35$) were administered the TAT tapping into their cognitive and affective patterns related to interpersonal functioning. The analyses for this study focused on two of the five dimensions from Westen's (1995) object-relations scoring system. The two dimensions were *affect-tone of relationship paradigms*, i.e., the extent to which interpersonal relationships are described by expressing malevolent or positive emotions, and *capacity for emotional investment in relationships*, i.e., the extent to which committed versus self-serving relationships are described. Attachment style was assessed using Bartholomew's attachment interview and coding (Bartholomew, & Horowitz, 1991) adapted for adolescents. Each participant received a score on secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing attachment style.

Results

As predicted higher ratings on preoccupied style were related to more positive representations of relationships, $r(49) = .31$, $p = .02$, and descriptions of committed relationships with evidence of concern about the other, $r(49) = .45$, $p = .001$. In contrast, higher ratings on dismissing style predicted negative representations of relationships, $r(49) = -.275$, $p = .05$; relationships were described as negative and self-serving, $r(49) = -.312$, $p = .026$.