

FEARFUL VS. DISMISSING ATTACHMENT PATTERNS: CONSTRUCT VALIDITY IN A CLINICAL ADOLESCENT SAMPLE

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Abstract

Two main approaches exist towards classification of attachment in adulthood and adolescence. The 3-category suggests that there are 3 main attachment patterns namely, secure, anxious-resistant, and dismissing (Main & Goldwyn, 1988). The 4-category approach argues that 4 main attachment patterns exists, namely secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful. In this study, the validity of the distinction between fearful and dismissing attachment patterns in adolescents was empirically investigated. 167 clinic-referred adolescents were rated on their attachment style and completed self-report measures to assess psychological functioning. As expected fearful individuals reported more negative affect, anxiety, attachment anxiety, and hostility than dismissing individuals. In addition, as predicted dismissing and fearful individuals both avoided close relationships compared to preoccupied and secure individuals. These findings lend credence to the usefulness of the distinction between fearful and dismissing attachment patterns in high-risk adolescents.

Introduction

Bowlby (1973) suggested an attachment model that explained the development of a bond between infant and mother. Several researchers advanced Bowlby's work by empirically documenting patterns of infant attachment. By observing and recording infants' responses to separation and reunion with a caregiver, Ainsworth et al. (1978) identified three distinct patterns of infant attachment: secure, anxious-resistant, and avoidant. Thus, it appears that in infancy, there are three distinct attachment styles.

Attachment plays a significant role not only in infants but also in children, adolescents, and adults by structuring expectations, interpretations, and experiences within close relationships. Recently researchers turned their focus towards investigating and measuring attachment patterns in adolescence and adulthood. This is best achieved by assessing characteristics of internal representations rather than behavioural patterns.

In extending the measurement of attachment to adults and adolescents, many researchers have continued to categorize attachment into 3 pre-

dominate categories. For example, the Adult Attachment Interview's (Main and Goldwyn, 1988) and the Attachment Interview for Children and Adolescence' (Ammaniti et al. 2001) attachment categories parallel the same 3 infant patterns found in infancy.

Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991), however, argued for four categories resulting from 2 dimensions: image of self (positive or negative) and image of others (positive or negative). Instead of 1 avoidant pattern this model has 2 (fearful and dismissing). Fearful individuals have a negative view of self and others, whereas dismissing individuals have a positive view of self and negative view of others.

Both fearful and dismissing individuals are characterized by avoiding close relationships, however, the underlying reasons for avoidance are theorized to be different. Fearful individuals desire intimate relationships but refrain from attempting to do so, due to their distrust of others and anticipation of rejection. This likely causes negative affect, anxiety, and more specifically attachment anxiety, which may be manifested as somatic complaints. Dismissing individuals, on the other hand, have no interest in close relationships, and as a consequence do not invest much time in them. The dismissing individual is described as self-reliant and content with his/her situation. Thus, the 2 avoidant styles are theoretically linked to different emotional adjustments.

This study examines the construct validity of fearful and dismissing attachment patterns. Factors that should theoretically distinguish and factors that should theoretically not distinguish the 2 groups will be measured.

Hypotheses

Fearful individuals will report more negative affect, symptoms of general and attachment anxiety, more somatic complaints and less self-esteem than dismissing individuals.

Overt behaviours, such as, level of avoidance of close relationships and current substance use will not differ between fearful and dismissing people.

Method

Participants: 167 adolescents referred for severe behavioural problems (10-17 yrs; mean age 14.3)

Measures: A) Youth Self-Report from which scales were constructed tapping into negative affect, anxiety, attachment anxiety, somatic complaints, hostility, depth of friendship, and substance use;

B) Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory;

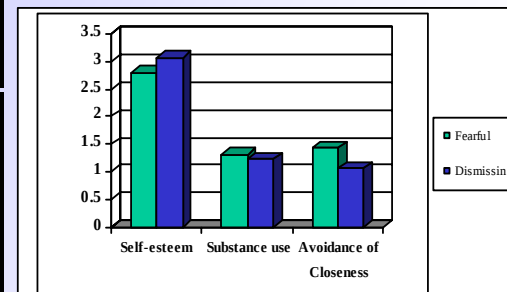
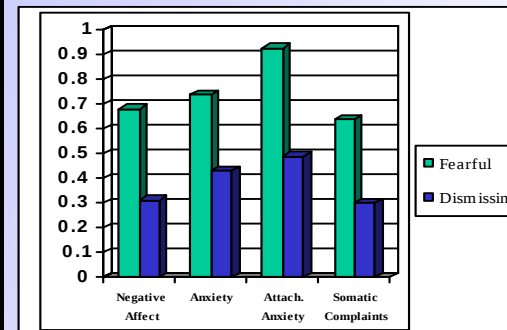
C) Attachment coded as continuous & categorical

Results

Secure: n = 11 (6.6%) Dismissing: n = 35 (21%)

Preoccupied: n = 41 (24.5%) Fearful: n = 64 (38.3%)

Categorical Approach: Differences between Fearful and Dismissing Individuals



As predicted fearful people reported more negative affect ($p = .001$), more general anxiety ($p = .003$), more attachment anxiety ($p = .001$), more somatic complaints ($p = .001$), and less self-esteem ($p = .04$) than dismissing people.

As predicted fearful and dismissing people did not differ with respect to substance use ($p = .26$) and number of confiding relationships ($p = .23$).

Continuous Approach

Scale	Dismissing	Fearful
Negative Affect	-.35**	.34**
Anxiety	-.29**	.25**
Attachment Anxiety	-.43**	.29**
Somatic Complaints	-.28**	.18*
Self-Esteem	.29**	-.26**
Substance Use	.25*	.009
Confiding in Relationships	-.29**	-.07

Note. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$.

Discussion

Results of the categorical and continuous analyses both lend support to the valid and useful distinction of fearful and dismissing attachment patterns in adolescence.

As theory predicts, people with either fearful or dismissing attachment patterns both demonstrate overt avoidance of intimate relationships. However, the underlying reasons of why they are avoiding relationships are likely different.

Results indicate that fearful individuals report higher levels of general and attachment anxiety, more somatic complaints, as well as more negative affect and lower self-esteem than dismissing individuals.

Clinicians faced with an adolescent client possessing an avoidant attachment style should keep in mind the distinction between fearful and dismissing attachment styles as they are linked to differential psychosocial functioning, and thus, to different treatment needs and goals.