

Dimensions of Attachment and Empathy Among Aggressive Adolescents *

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Introduction

Empathy generally refers to “understanding and sharing in another’s emotional state or context” (Cohen & Strayer, 1996). Many researchers agree that both cognitive (i.e., perspective taking; PT) and affective components are relevant in the study of empathy. Empathy is associated with prosocial development (Eisenberg, 2004), and is protective against bullying (Piejak, 2004) and aggression (Burke, 2001). Experiencing empathy may prevent aggression by helping children anticipate how others might feel when they enact particular behaviours (Schultz, et al., 2004).

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982) posits that quality of child-caregiver interaction is crucial to children’s socio-emotional development, including empathy development. Research with normative populations suggests that attachment security is associated with better perspective taking (Lundy, 2003), and greater empathy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Moreover, research suggests that parental negative expressivity is inversely related to empathic responding in children (Eisenberg, et al., 2001). However, the link between specific forms of attachment *insecurity* and empathy has not been examined (Repacholi & Trapolini, 2004). This seems particularly salient with high-risk populations where both attachment and empathy disruption are more common (Lovett & Sheffield, 2007; Kobak, Little, & Race, 2001).

Two dimensions of attachment have been proposed by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991): *anxiety*, which refers to the degree to which individuals experience anxiety or distress when faced with a separation or threatened separation of an attachment figure, and *avoidance*, or the degree to which individuals avoid attachment figures when distressed.

We predicted that attachment avoidance would be negatively correlated with EC, but unrelated to PT, as attachment avoidance is characterized by disconnection and devaluation of relationships. The relation of attachment anxiety to empathy seems less straight forward. On one hand, experiencing anxiety about relationships may foster youths’ sense of being empathic via their vigilance of others’ emotional states, but on the other hand, their distress may increase self-focus and impair genuine empathic connection. We therefore predicted that attachment anxiety would be positively related to youths’ self-report of EC, but be negatively related to PT.

Method

Participants

Participants were 120 adolescents aged 12 – 18 (59 males; 61 females) at high-risk for aggressive behavior; 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 15.4 years of age on average.

Measures

Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). The IRI (Davis, 1983) is 28-item self-report inventory that assesses participants on cognitive (PT) and affective (EC) dimensions of empathy. Subscale alphas were .85 and .91.

Adolescent Attachment Interview (AAI). Youths were administered a 1- to 2-hour semi-structured interview adapted for adolescents from the Family Attachment Interview (FAI; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The interviews are coded by trained and reliable coders, adhering to Bartholomew’s coding system, which is well-validated for adults as well as high risk adolescents (Scharfe, 2002). Based on youths’ accounts of their experiences and feelings in family relationships, and the consistency of 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 (no correspondence with prototype) to 9 (excellent fit with prototype). Dimensions of anxiety and avoidance were calculated using the four continuous attachment ratings, and, consistent with Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) as:

$$\text{Attachment anxiety} = P + S - F - D$$

$$\text{Attachment avoidance} = F + D - P - S$$

Results

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

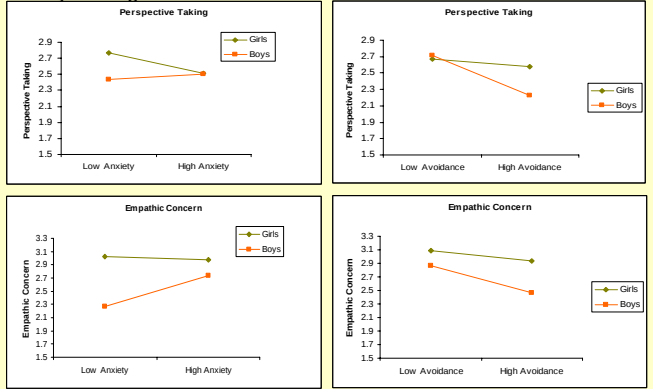
	Attachment anxiety	Attachment avoidance	Perspective Taking	Empathic concern
BOYS	<i>M</i> = 1.70 ^a <i>SD</i> = 3.17	<i>M</i> = 1.98 ^a <i>SD</i> = 3.09	<i>M</i> = 2.41 ^a <i>SD</i> = .50	<i>M</i> = 2.60 ^a <i>SD</i> = .63
GIRLS	<i>M</i> = 2.87 ^b <i>SD</i> = 2.57	<i>M</i> = 1.13 ^a <i>SD</i> = 2.94	<i>M</i> = 2.62 ^b <i>SD</i> = .58	<i>M</i> = 3.00 ^b <i>SD</i> = .54

Note. Different letters within columns indicate significant sex differences.

For both girls and boys PT and EC were correlated, however for boys this correlation was significantly higher ($r=.65^{**}$; $z=2.68^{**}$) than for girls ($r=.27^{*}$). Consistent with predictions, attachment anxiety was correlated with EC ($r = .25^{**}$) but not with PT. Further, higher levels of attachment avoidance were associated with less EC ($r = -.22^{*}$) but, contrary to predictions, also with less PT ($r = -.25^{**}$). Unexpectedly, the pattern of findings differed significantly by sex.

For boys, attachment anxiety was related to greater PT ($r = .39^{**}$), whereas for girls, this relation was negative ($r = -.27^{*}$). Boys’ attachment anxiety was also positively related to EC ($r = .37^{**}$); this relation was not significant in girls. Similarly, boys’ attachment avoidance was negatively related to both PT ($r = -.45^{**}$) and EC ($r = -.32^{*}$); these relations were not significant in girls.

Figure 1. Relations between attachment and empathy dimensions for boys and girls.



Discussion

The pattern of findings differed significantly by sex. Firstly, there was a significantly stronger relationship between EC and PT for boys. It seems that boys who are able to take another person’s perspective cognitively are also more likely to connect emotionally with another’s experience (and vice versa). For girls, these abilities, although still correlated, seem to be less strongly linked. Socialization theory (e.g., Dunn, Bretherton, & Munn, 1987) suggests that girls are thought from an early age to be more attuned to and responsive to others’ emotions. Thus, regardless of attachment anxiety and avoidance, girls’ socialization toward attending to the affective states of others prevails and they are able to feel emotional concern (almost at a ceiling level in our study). However, because girls are socialized to view relationships as important, too much anxiety about relationships (or anxiety in the context of abusive or dysfunctional relationships) may overwhelm them emotionally, making them less capable to perspective take.

On the other hand, for boys, who are not socialized to be as attuned to others’ emotions, attachment anxiety may make them alert to the importance of relationship and enhance their ability to feel empathy and take perspectives of others, rather than to callously disregard the experiences of others.

These results must be considered in the context of the current sample, which includes youths with considerable trauma histories and relationship disruption, either in the form of aggression in the home, or, commonly, multiple foster placements.

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