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Autonomy Supportive Comments during Parent-Child Interactions and Early Theory of Mind Development

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Personal Distress Mediates the Relationship between Adult Attachment and Empathy
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Introduction

Variations in levels of empathic concern have been attributed to a variety of factors, including early familial relationships (Leerkes & Crockenberg, 2005; Dix, 1991). The formation of secure attachment, which usually develops within the context of warm and sensitive caregiving (Ainsworth et al., 1978), has been linked to higher levels of empathy in children. More specifically, securely attached preschoolers exhibited more empathic responding than insecurely attached preschoolers (Keenboorth, Bartholomew, & Sroufe, 1988). These decreased levels of empathy in insecurely attached children may reflect more self-focused emotions associated with distress (Ainsworth et al., 1978), possibly rendering it difficult to consider the emotional needs of others (van der Mark et al., 2002).

Hazan and Shaver (1987) theorized that adult relationships may reflect attachment representations from childhood. Thus, it is plausible that adults with securely attached representations may demonstrate more empathic concern than those who hold more insecure representations. The present research explored adult attachment representations in relation to self-focused (personal distress) and other-focused (empathy) perspectives. secure adults (low personal distress and high empathy) would predict less distress, higher perspective-taking and higher levels of empathic concern. By contrast, fearful and preoccupied representations were expected to predict more distress and, in turn, less perspective-taking and empathy. Dismissive was expected to be associated with less perspective-taking and, in turn, less empathy.

Methods

Participants were included if they were between the ages of 18-35 (n=225). Participants completed a Demographic Form and the Personal Distress Scale (Amir, 1987), the Empathy Questionnaire (Selman, 1980), the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980), and the Insecure Attachment Scales (Ainsworth et al., 1978). The Relationship Scales Questionnaire was used to gather information on the individual's current relationship, if any, and the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire was used to gather information on the participant's current relationship, if any, and the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire was used to gather information on the participant's support network.

Results

Correlations among adult attachment representations, distress, perspective-taking, and empathy are presented in Table 1. Mediation analyses were conducted using the PROCESS macro (see Hayes, 2013). Analyses revealed a significant positive relationship between secure attachment representations and empathic concern, and this relationship was mediated by less personal distress and more perspective-taking, in serial (p=.01, F(3,196)=3.87, p=.001, 95% CI [0.048 to 0.063] (see Table 1). By contrast, both fearful and preoccupied representations predicted more personal distress, followed by less perspective-taking; and in turn, less empathic concern (p=.01, F(3,196)=28.29, p=.001, 95% CI [0.043 to 0.052], respectively) (see Figs 2 and 3). Finally, the negative relationship between dismissive representations and empathic concern was direct, without mediation by distress or perspective-taking.

Table 1: Correlations among Adult Attachment Relations, Distress, Perspective-Taking, and Empathy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Personal</th>
<th>Perspective-Taking</th>
<th>Empathic Concern</th>
<th>Distress</th>
<th>Concern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult Attachment</td>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>-0.46**</td>
<td>-0.17**</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fearful</td>
<td>0.11**</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>0.11**</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dismissive</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.17**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Distress</td>
<td>-0.14*</td>
<td>-0.12*</td>
<td>-0.48**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perspective-Taking</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05, **p<.01.

Fig. 1: Serial Mediation with Secure Attachment as IV

Fig. 2: Serial Mediation with Fearful Attachment as IV

Fig. 3: Serial Mediation with Preoccupied Attachment as IV

Conclusion

The hypothesized relations between adults' attachment representations and empathic concern were received empirical support. Adults with higher levels of secure representations reported increased levels of empathic concern, and this relationship was mediated by less distress and more perspective-taking. By contrast, adults with insecure representations demonstrated less empathy. For adults with fearful and preoccupied representations, this relationship was mediated by more distress and less perspective-taking, in serial. The present results extend previous findings on the relations among distress, perspective-taking and empathic concern. In addition, the findings may add to our understanding of the intergenerational transmission of attachment relationships. Parental own representations from childhood may influence how they respond to their children's emotional distress (Leerkes, Parsons, & Gudmundson, 2011). Sensitivity responding to children's emotions has been linked to the formation of secure attachments in children (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

References


Appendix