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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, 2006; 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 (Kestenbaum, Farber, & Sroufe, 1989). 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 (perspective-taking, empathy) emotions. It was expected that secure attachment representations would predict less distress, more 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 Participants included 225 (67 males, 158 females; Mean age=19.85, range 18-66) undergraduates from a Midwestern university.

Procedure Participants completed an online survey that consisting of (a) the Relationship Scales Questionnaire, (b) the Interpersonal Reactivity Index and (c) the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire.

Measures

❖ **Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ):** 30 short statements in which participant rate, on a 5 point scale, the extent to which each statement best describes their close relationships (Griffin, & Bartholomew, 1994).

❖ **Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI):** several scales designed to assess 'Personal Distress' (e.g., "Being in a tense emotional situation scares me"). 'Perspective-Taking' (e.g., "I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look like from their perspective"), and 'Empathic Concern' (e.g., "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me"). (Davis, 1983)

❖ **Toronto Empathy Questionnaire:** 16 items in which participants rate, on a 4-point scale, statements such as "When someone else is feeling excited, I tend to get excited too," on a scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (always) (Spreng et al., 2009)

Results

Correlations among adults' 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 ($R^2=.24$, $F(3,193)=26.37$, $p<.001$, 95% CI: [0.048 to 0.983]. (see Fig. 1). By contrast, both fearful and preoccupied representations predicted more personal distress, followed by less perspective-taking, and in turn, less empathic concern ($R^2=.23$, $F(3,199)=26.38$, $p<.001$, 95% CI: [-0.590 to -0.056]; $R^2=.24$, $F(3,197)=25.96$, $p<.001$, 95% CI: [-0.043 to -0.002], respectively) (see Figs. 2 & 3). Finally, the negative relation 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

Variable	Personal		Empathic Concern
	Distress	Taking	
Adult Attachment			
Secure	-.46**	.17**	.21**
Fearful	.31**	-.08	-.10*
Preoccupied	.21**	-.09*	.07
Dismissive	.01	.02	-.17**
Personal Distress	-----	-.14*	-.12*
Perspective-Taking	-----	-----	.48**
Empathic Concern	-----	-----	-----

* $p<.06$, * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$.

Fig. 1 Serial Mediation with Secure Attachment as IV

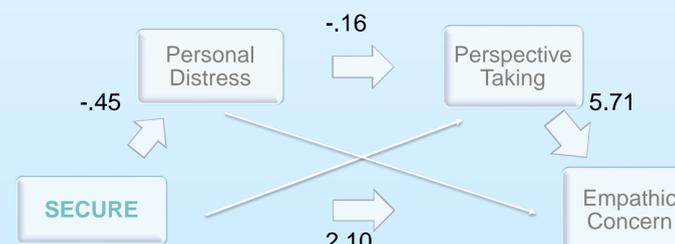


Fig. 2 Serial Mediation with Fearful Attachment as IV

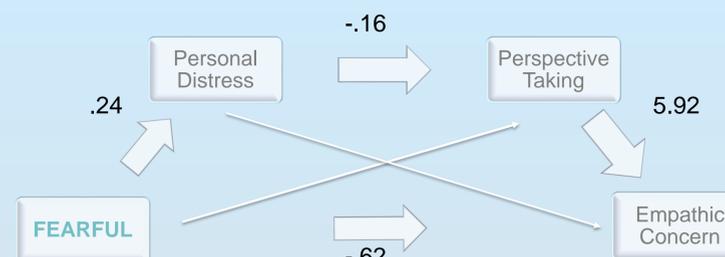
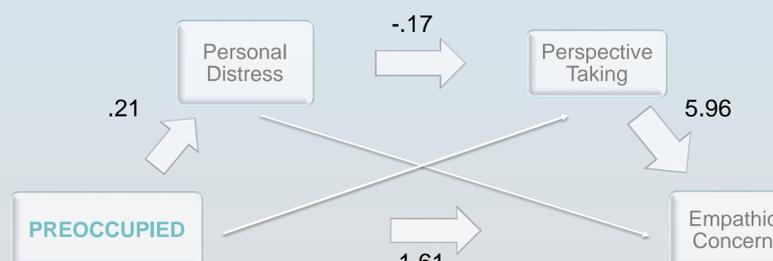


Fig. 3 Serial Mediation with Preoccupied Attachment as IV



Abstract

Adult attachment representations were explored in relation to personal distress, perspective-taking and empathic concern. The relationship between secure representations and empathy were mediated by less personal distress and more perspective-taking, in serial. By contrast, fearful and preoccupied representations were associated with less empathy, and this relationship was mediated, in serial, by more personal distress and less perspective-taking.

Conclusion

The hypothesized relations between adults' attachment representations and empathic concern 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. 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. Parents' own representations from childhood may influence how they respond to their children's emotional distress (Leerkes, Parade, & Gudmundson, 2011). Sensitive responding to children's emotions has been linked to the formation of secure attachments in children (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

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