Relationship between executive function, attachment style, and psychotic like experiences in typically developing youth

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1. Introduction

Considerable evidence now shows continuity between clinically-significant psychotic symptoms in patient populations and psychotic-like experiences (PLE's) in the general population. PLE's are subsyndromal experiences that approximate the positive and negative symptoms of psychotic disorders (DeRosse and Karlsgodt, 2015; Kaymaz and van Os, 2010). Moreover, although schizophrenia affects only 0.4%–0.7% of the global population (Linscott and van Os, 2010), the median annual prevalence rate for adults who report PLE manifestations is approximately 7.2% (Linscott and van Os, 2013). Prevalence rates of PLE's are substantially higher in late childhood and adolescence, with estimates between 40% and 66% (Laurens et al., 2012; Wigman et al., 2012). Continuity between PLE's and psychotic disorders is supported by 1) an overlap of etiological correlates including lower education, unemployment, and family psychiatric history (Linscott and van Os, 2013), and 2) similarities between the quality and distribution of symptom profiles in patients with psychotic disorders and healthy individuals who report PLE's (DeRosse et al., 2014a). Even in the absence of a psychiatric diagnosis PLE's may be associated with variation in cognition (Barnett et al., 2012; Cochrane et al., 2012; Korponay et al., 2014; Mollon et al., 2016) and social function (DeRosse et al., 2017) and may engender emotional distress (Fervaha et al., 2014). Furthermore, PLE's are associated with greater rates of psychotic disorders later in life (Cannon et al., 2002; Chapman et al., 1994; Hansen et al., 2005; Poulton et al., 2000; Welham et al., 2009). Thus, efforts have been made to understand specific factors that contribute to the development of PLE's, which together may contribute to PLE's.

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including developmental disruptions (Karlgodt et al., 2009; Weinberger and Marenco, 2003), genetic factors (Linney et al., 2003; Straub et al., 1996), and environmental factors (MacDonald 3rd et al., 2001), as well as to identify potential resilience factors that impede these symptoms from reaching clinical significance.

In addition to genetic or developmental insults, the “attachment-development-cognitive” (ADC) model posits that traumatic events and psychosocial stressors that impair attachment may also contribute to vulnerability to psychotic disorders by disrupting neural connectivity and structure formation in the developing brain (Rajkumar, 2014). Attachment theory proposes that child-caregiver emotional bonds form a template for future interpersonal relationships (Bowlby, 1969). Specifically, secure attachment, when the child experiences the primary caregivers as responsive, available and trustworthy, facilitates healthy adult relationships. In contrast, insecure attachment from unreliable or neglectful caregivers, results in difficulties establishing and maintaining relationships in adulthood (Bowlby, 1980). Insecure attachment has been linked to a host of negative outcomes throughout the lifespan, including behavioral difficulties and psychopathology (Hoeve et al., 2012; Lee and Hankin, 2009). Moreover, high rates of insecure attachment, with some estimates of up to 74%, are seen in schizophrenia (Konver-Nieberg et al., 2014; MacBeth et al., 2011).

Early trauma is a significant predictor of insecure attachment (Allen et al., 1996; Styron and Janoff-Bulman, 1997) and the high prevalence of insecure attachment in schizophrenia corresponds to the higher levels of early adversity they experience relative to healthy controls (Cannon et al., 2014; Read et al., 2005). A history of childhood trauma significantly increases psychosis risk (Varese et al., 2012), and the severity and frequency of childhood maltreatment are positively related to hallucinations and delusions (Schenkel et al., 2005). Moreover, the relationship between severity of childhood trauma and severity of psychotic symptoms is the same in healthy individuals assessed for PLE’s (DeRoose et al., 2014b). The strong link between insecure attachment and trauma, and their collective effect on symptom expression, provides support for the role of attachment style in the development of PLEs. In fact, insecure attachment has been related to increased PLE’s, likelihood of developing maladaptive coping styles (Konver-Nieberg et al., 2014) and has been found to mediate specific childhood adversities and types of psychotic symptoms (Berry et al., 2007; Sitko et al., 2014).

Additionally, insecure attachment may be linked to cognitive impairments that make one vulnerable to the development of PLEs. Individuals with a history of early trauma show neuropsychological impairments (DePrince et al., 2009; Mezzacappa et al., 2001), and environmental factors (MacDonald 3rd et al., 2001), as well as to identify potential resilience factors that impede these symptoms from reaching clinical significance.

2. Experimental materials and methods

2.1. Participants

Our community sample consisted of 52 healthy volunteers aged 10 to 21 (mean = 17.09 ± 2.95) recruited for a longitudinal study via posted flyers, advertisements and referrals from previous study participants. Data utilized for the present analyses was collected at participant’s baseline study visit. Our sample was 51.9% female (n = 27) and 61.5% Caucasian (n = 32), 23.1% African-American (n = 12), 5.8% Asian (n = 3), and 9.6% “Other” (n = 5). All participants over age 18 provided written informed consent and minors provided assent alongside parental written consent; the protocol was approved by the Northwell Health Institutional Review Board. Participants were excluded if they had any Axis-I diagnosis, any intellectual disability, any incidence of head injury with loss of consciousness, any medical illnesses that could affect brain functioning, or were taking any medications with known cognitive effects.

2.2. Clinical assessments

2.2.1. Diagnostic interviews

To rule out present and lifetime Axis-I disorders, all participants were administered the Structured Clinical Interview for the DSM-IV, Non-Patient Version (SCID-NP) (First et al., 1997). Participants aged 10–15 were also administered supplemental sections of the Kiddie-Schedule for Affective Disorders and Schizophrenia – Present and Lifetime Version (K-SADS-PL) to rule out additional child-onset disorders. Assessments were conducted by trained graduate-level raters, with diagnosis confirmed by a consensus of at least two faculty psychologists. Diagnostic interviews were supplemented with family informants whenever possible.

2.2.2. Subclinical psychosis

Subclinical psychosis was assessed using the Community Assessment of Psychic Experiences (CAPE) (Stefanis et al., 2002), a 42-item, self-report questionnaire that measures three dimensions of subclinical psychopathology including positive, negative and depressive symptoms. Because depressive symptoms fell outside the scope of the present study, we only examined the positive (CAPE-p) and negative (CAPE-n) subscales and did not include depressive items in our CAPE total score. The CAPE-p and CAPE-n showed good reliability in the present sample, with Cronbach’s alpha estimates of α = 0.84 and 0.85, respectively.

2.2.3. Executive functioning behaviors

EF behaviors were measured using the 80-item self-report form of the Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Function (BRIEF-SR, O’Doherty and Nguyen, 2004)). This self-report measure asks participants to rate real-world behaviors that would be adversely affected in childhood and adolescence by EF deficits. The BRIEF-SR contains 8 subscales: 1) Working Memory, 2) Plan/Organize, 3) Organization of Materials, 4) Task Completion, 5) Inhibit, 6) Shift, 7) Emotional Control, and 8) Monitor. All of these scales demonstrated acceptable reliability in this sample, with Cronbach’s alpha estimates for all subscales ranging from 0.60 to 0.87 and 0.95 for the BRIEF Total score.

2.2.4. Attachment insecurity

Attachment was assessed using a 20-item measure, the Experiences in Close Relationship Scale – Revised – General Short Form (ECR-R-GSF), which includes two 10-item subscales measuring attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Wilkinson, 2011). Attachment insecurity is conceptualized as the degree of difficulty with developing and maintaining a stable sense of intimacy and trust in close relationships, including the degree to which intimate relationships are avoided altogether (attachment avoidance) and the degree to which existing intimate
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