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Promoting or suppressing resilience to mental health outcomes in at risk young people: The role of parental and peer attachment and school connectedness



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ABSTRACT

Adolescent attachment relationships formed with parents are salient predictors of mental health. Few studies, however, have demonstrated whether peer attachment or school connectedness can predict resilience to mental health difficulties when a young person is at risk due to poor parental attachment. Ninety adolescents (44 females and 46 males) living in economically disadvantaged areas and attending informal schooling projects in and around Guatemala City participated. Participants completed self-report measures of parental and peer attachment, school connectedness and mental health. Resilience to mental health difficulties was predicted by more secure school connectedness but lower levels of secure peer attachment. School connectedness may provide a role in promoting resilience for mental health for adolescents living in risk, whereas the potential negative influence that secure attachments to peers exerts, in context of poor parental attachment, needs to be explored further.

1. Introduction

1.1. Guatemala

Guatemala is one of the poorest and most violent countries in Central America (Branas et al., 2013; Hernandez, Hong, Frias-Martinez, Whitby, & Frias-Martinez, 2017). With a total population estimated to be around 16,673,000, 60% are thought to be living in poverty (Hernandez et al., 2017). The experience of poverty has negative effects on physical and psychological developmental outcomes – and these are known as being long-term and pervasive (Gallo & Matthews, 2003; Lund et al., 2011; Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012).

These negative effects might be particularly salient for children and young people, as currently around 36% of the population is under the age of 15 years (Pan American Health Organization, 2016). Children are often forced to work to support their families, as subsistence farmers in rural areas, or selling on the streets in towns and cities. According to UNICEF (2016), around 26% of Guatemalan children are involved in the labour market. With high levels of child labour there is a notable effect on school attendance, with primary school enrollment currently around 89%, and a significant drop to 69% in the numbers enrolling into secondary school (UNICEF, 2016).

Clear links are evident within the research literature between child poverty and later adolescent mental health difficulties (Yoshikawa et al., 2012), an outcome of particular concern for the present study. Within Guatemala the prevalence rates of mental

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disorders is around 27.8%, although only 1% of the national health budget is spent on mental health support (Pan American Health Organization, 2012). Few studies have specifically investigated mental health in young people in Guatemala. However, one study, which was carried out in 2015 with a representative sample of 4374 young people did find that of those between 13 and 17 years of age, 15.6% had seriously contemplated suicide, and 6.5% identified as having no close friends (World Health Organization, 2015). There is clearly further scope to investigate the effects of mental health in at risk young people in Guatemala, and to explore how resilience to mental health outcomes could be promoted for this population.

1.2. Parental attachment as risk

A risk factor can be defined as “a measurable characteristic in a group of individuals or their situation that predicts a negative outcome on a specific outcome criteria” (Wright & Masten, 2005, p. 9). Risk factors can comprise traits, experiences, situations or relationships that are ultimately measurable (Keyes, 2004). They impinge on development contributing to negative trajectories (Murray, 2003). The quality of relationship that a young person forms with their parent is one of the most salient influences on their mental health outcomes (Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000; Smokowski, Bacallao, Cotter, & Evans, 2015), and can be considered a potential risk factor in their development. Restraints within this relationship have profound influences on wellbeing. More insecure attachments to parents in adolescence are associated with conduct related problems (Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010; Kochanska & Kim, 2013), and more severe emotional difficulties (Brumariu & Kerns, 2010; Shochet, Homel, Cockshaw, & Montgomery, 2008). It is therefore, an undisputed stance that attachments to parents hold at least some influence over adolescent mental health outcomes. For this reason, more insecure parental attachment can be conceptualized as a risk factor.

Nevertheless, despite the plethora of research studies demonstrating that more insecure attachments to parents contribute to mental health difficulties, whether this relationship holds for at risk populations and particularly for Guatemalan children could be further explored. Furthermore, investigating how resilience to mental health could be promoted in this context of risk is warranted.

1.3. Peer attachment as protection

Attachments that adolescents form with their peers could be protective and important relationships that may have some influence on mental health outcomes. During adolescence individuals become more autonomous, they are not so dependent upon parents and are able to transfer certain dependencies onto their friends (Allen, 2008). Individuals will gravitate towards their friends in times of stress, seeking them out to help meet their attachment needs. Their peers may become sources of social and emotional support (Laible, 2007) and can serve as safe havens and secure bases for emotional support (Zeifman & Hazan, 2008).

Research has demonstrated links between peer attachments and mental health in adolescence (Oldfield, Humphrey, & Hebron, 2015a). Lower levels of peer attachment are related to increases in conduct problems such as externalizing problems and bullying (McElhaney, Immele, Smith, & Allen, 2006; Laible, Carlo, & Raffaelli, 2000; Burton, Florell, & Wygant, 2012). Links are also evident between poorer peer attachment and the display of emotional difficulties, such as low mood and self-esteem (Formoso, Gonzales, & Aiken, 2000; Gorrese & Andrisano-Ruggieri, 2013; Millings, Buck, Montgomery, Spears, & Stallard, 2012; Nickerson & Nagle, 2005).

There is however, some inconsistency within the literature as to whether higher or lower quality relationships with peers leads to worse outcomes for adolescents. Specifically, in the context of risk for adolescents (i.e. poorer parental relationships), evidence suggests that those with higher quality peer relationships actually experience poorer outcomes (Young, Berenson, Cohen, & Garcia, 2005). Scholte, van Lieshout, and van Aken (2001) found that young people with the worst adjustment problems were those who had experienced poor parental support despite high levels of support from peers. Furthermore, Helsen et al. (2000) demonstrated that in the context of poor parental attachment, emotional problems displayed by young people were worse when there were perceived strong levels of support from friends compared with those who receive little support. Chester, Jones, Zalot, and Sterrett (2007) have provided evidence of an interaction between parenting behaviour and peer influences on externalizing behaviour. For example, when mothers demonstrated low levels of positive parenting, young people with higher levels of peer relationship quality demonstrated more, rather than fewer, externalizing problems.

Young people who have grown up with poorer attachments to caregivers might seek to compensate for this perceived lack of support by forming relationships with their peers (Helsen et al., 2000). However, if they have not developed the confidence and necessary skills to engage in positive relationship formation, they may gravitate towards forming affiliations with more deviant peers (Scholte et al., 2001). Indeed, individuals who have lower quality relationships with their parents may be more susceptible to the influence of their friends. This is supported by German, Gonzales, and Dumka (2009), who have shown that peer relationships are more influential when parental support is low.

Further study is therefore warranted on whether peer attachment can help or hinder resilience to mental health difficulties in the context of risk (poor parental attachment), and particularly for young people in Guatemala who might be exposed to additional risk factors associated with poverty.

1.4. School connectedness as protection

The bond an adolescent forms with their school or educational establishment can be termed school connectedness, and has the potential to act as a protective factor. Goodenow (1993) defines it as ‘the extent to which students feel personally accepted and respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment’ (p. 80). School connectedness is therefore an umbrella term attempting to operationalize how much an individual feels part of their school, experiences positive relationships with teachers and peers, and

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