



The relationship between ‘theory of mind’ and attachment-related anxiety and avoidance in Italian adolescents



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A B S T R A C T

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This study examined the relationship between ‘theory of mind’ and attachment-related anxiety and avoidance in adolescence. The “Reading the Mind in the Eyes” test and the “Experiences in Close Relationships – Relationship Structures” questionnaires were administered to 402 14–19 year-old adolescents. Contrary to expectations, anxiety but not avoidance with mother was associated with less accurate mindreading, and this effect was stronger in younger than in older adolescents. Results might be explained in terms of the inconsistency of caregiver behavior that is supposed to cause anxious strategies, and thus illustrate the need to consider not only the effects, but also the causes of different types of insecure strategies.

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Introduction

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980, 1988; see also Cassidy & Shaver, 1999, 2008), humans develop experience-based mental representations of their relationships with emotionally significant others such as parents, friends or partners. These mental representations, or ‘internal working models’, of attachment relationships are thought to be responsive to new experiences throughout the entire life-span (see also Davila & Cobb, 2004, Fraley & Brumbaugh, 2004, Magai, 2008) and to affect the way people perceive, attend to, and process emotionally significant information (see also Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, 2008). Thus, attachment theory basically suggests a bidirectional causal relationship between attachment and the cognitive abilities and processes that condition experience (see also Steivenart, Roskam, Meunier, & van de Moortele, 2011, for recent theory and evidence).

A cognitive ability that is particularly likely to be thus related to attachment is ‘theory of mind’, i.e. an individual’s ability to “impute mental states to himself and others” (Premack & Woodruff, 1978), which is manifest in a “mostly preconscious mental activity” called ‘mentalization’ (Fonagy, Gergely, & Target, 2007). On the one hand, in fact, it seems reasonable to expect that ‘theory of mind’ affects attachment, as the quality of the ability to impute mental states to oneself and others is

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likely to affect the quality of the experience-based 'internal working models' of attachment relationships between oneself and others. Effects of this kind are suggested for example by the fact that children with autism, a congenital pathology associated with 'theory of mind' deficits, have been found to display less attachment security than comparisons without autism (Rutgers, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van Ijzendoorn, & van Berckelaer-Onnes, 2004) as well as by the fact that mentalization-based treatments have been found to reduce attachment-related avoidance (Rossouw & Fonagy, 2012) and to be in general effective with attachment-related psychological disorders (see Bateman & Fonagy, 2012; Midgley & Vrouva, 2012). On the other hand, given the important role that 'internal working models' of attachment relationships are thought to play in the processing of emotionally significant information and given the particular emotional significance of one's own and other people's mental states, it seems also reasonable to expect that attachment affects 'theory of mind'. Accordingly, in the literature on the relationship between attachment and 'theory of mind' usually the assumption is made that variations in the quality of attachment drive variations in the frequency, sophistication and accuracy of mentalization (e.g., Dykas & Cassidy, 2011).

Apart from directionality, these two opposite ways to conceive the relationship between attachment and 'theory of mind' may be expected to differ also with respect to their temporal and differential dynamics. In fact, the effects of 'theory of mind' on attachment are likely to have rather a diachronic than a synchronic character, as they need to accumulate over time in order to affect the 'internal working models', and to concern rather indifferently all kinds of attachment relationships, as 'theory of mind' does not itself imply a distinction between specific kinds of attachment relationships and may thus not be expected to affect them differentially if it is not itself differentially affected by them. By contrast, the effects of attachment on 'theory of mind' are likely to have not only a synchronic, but also a diachronic character, as the immediate effects of 'internal working models' on mental state processing may diminish but remain latent over time, and to depend on the kind of attachment relationship, as at any given time some kinds of attachment relationships (e.g., with parents) may be qualitatively different or predominant with respect to other kinds of attachment relationships (e.g., with friends or romantic partners). In addition, the temporal and the differential dynamics are likely to overlap, so that for some kinds of attachment relationships (e.g., with parents) the latent effects might be more important than the concurrent effects, whereas for other kinds of attachment relationships (e.g., with friends or romantic partners) the opposite might be true.

Although effects of these kinds may be expected to be manifest across the entire life-span, research on the relationship between attachment and 'theory of mind' has so far focused on children, evidencing that attachment security is generally associated with enhanced 'theory of mind', both diachronically, i.e. from a developmental point of view (see Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002, Fonagy et al., 2007, Fonagy, Gergely, & Target, 2008, for theory and review), and synchronically, i.e. from a psychodynamic point of view (see Dykas & Cassidy, 2011, for theory and review). By contrast, though adolescence is generally recognized to be an important period for the development and differentiation of attachment relationships (Allen, 2008), on the one hand, and for the development and sophistication of 'theory of mind' (Miller, 2012), on the other, little is known about the relationship between adolescents' attachment and 'theory of mind'. In fact, to the best of our knowledge, there are so far only two studies that focus on this relationship (Ammaniti, Tambelli, Zavattini, Vismara, & Volpi, 1999, Humfress, O'Connor, Slaughter, Target, & Fonagy, 2002). Using similar measures of attachment and very different measures of 'theory of mind' with very young adolescents (12–14 year-olds), both studies found that attachment security was associated with enhanced 'theory of mind': Ammaniti et al. (1999) found that attachment security, as assessed by the 'Attachment Interview for Childhood and Adolescence' (Ammaniti, van Ijzendoorn, Speranza, & Tambelli, 2000), was associated with more frequent and sophisticated mentalization, as assessed by the 'Reflective Functioning Scale' (Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Moran, & Higgitt, 1991); similarly, Humfress et al. (2002) found that attachment security, as assessed by the 'Child Attachment Interview' (Target, Fonagy, Shmueli-Goetz, Datta, & Schneider, 1998), was associated with more accurate mentalization, as assessed by an adapted version of the Strange Stories test (Happé, 1994).

Although these two findings with adolescents parallel the general findings with children, it would be premature to suppose that the psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between attachment and 'theory of mind' are the same in childhood and in adolescence. Apart from the fact that the evidence is still very limited and does concern only very young adolescents, the main problem that this and similar generalizations concerning the relationship between attachment and 'theory of mind' have to face is that both attachment and 'theory of mind' are rather complex and heterogeneous theoretical constructs. In fact, while children's quality of attachment is usually assessed by behavioral measures, adolescents' quality of attachment is usually assessed by interview measures of 'states of mind' regarding attachment or by self-report measures of 'attachment styles', and it is commonly acknowledged that these three types of measures assess quite different, albeit related constructs (Allen, 2008; Crowell, Fraley, & Shaver, 2008). Similarly, 'theory of mind' may be assessed, in both children and adolescents, by a large variety of very different types of measures which concern very different aspects and manifestations of 'theory of mind'. For example, one major type of measures relies on particular tasks assessing the accuracy or speed of cue- or inference-based recognition of first- or higher-order affective or epistemic mental states, whereas other types of measures rely on observer-rated interviews or self-report questionnaires assessing the frequency, sophistication, or accuracy of reference to mental states.

Given this empirical and conceptual background, the primary aim of the present research was to provide first evidence about how adolescents' self-reported attachment styles relate to their performance on a standard 'theory of mind' task, and thereby to test theoretical predictions based on contemporary attachment theory. At present, there are basically two heterogeneous, though not necessarily incompatible theoretical frameworks that allow to derive theoretical predictions concerning the relationship between adolescents' attachment and 'theory of mind': Dykas and Cassidy's (2011) integrative life-span-encompassing model of attachment-related social information processing, and Mikulincer and Shaver's (2007, 2008)

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