



## Sex-specific relationships among attachment security, social values, and sensation seeking in early adolescence: Implications for adolescents' externalizing problem behaviour

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### A B S T R A C T

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In early adolescence, attachment security reflects not only the quality of ongoing relationships with parents, but also how adolescents process social relationships with "others" – that is, their "social value orientation" – with possible implications for adolescents' risk-taking. In this study, a sample of Italian early adolescents were administered self-report measures in order to examine the relationships (a) between early adolescents' perceived attachment security to mothers and fathers, social values (related to family and the socio-cultural context), and sensation seeking (as a temperamental predisposition to risk-taking), and (b) between these variables and adolescents' externalizing problem behaviour. Adolescents were more securely attached to the same-sexed parent. Further, attachment security with the opposite-sexed parent predicted more conservative social value orientations, and lower levels of problem behaviour. In contrast, sensation seeking predicted self-enhancement and openness-to-change values to a greater extent, and, in girls, lower levels of attachment security to mothers and fathers.

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Early adolescence is an eventful developmental period during which children go through physical, cognitive, emotional and social changes. During this period of transition, attachment security reflects not only the quality of ongoing relationships with parents (e.g., Allen, 2008), but it is also likely to be associated to how adolescents process social relationships with "others" – that is, their "social value orientation" (Mikulincer et al., 2003) – with possible implications for adolescents' risk-taking.

In this study, we examined the relationships between early adolescents' perceived attachment security to their mothers and fathers, their social value orientation, and their sensation seeking (as a temperamental predisposition to risk-taking; Zuckerman, 1979). Moreover, we explored, for the first time, the relationships between these variables and with adolescents' externalizing problem behaviour. In the first section of the introduction, we present the variables of the study, and the preliminary evidence of their connection to early adolescents' externalizing problems. Then, when presenting the hypotheses of the study, we will propose a unified conceptual model linking these variables in early adolescence.

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## Factors related to adolescents' externalizing problem behaviour

### *Attachment security to parents*

Attachment security – that is, the affective bond that an individual forms with an attachment figure and that provides him/her with feelings of security and comfort (e.g., Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1980) – has been increasingly recognized to be central to the social and psychological adjustment over the life span. In late childhood and early adolescence, the attachment system and the social representations of people and of relationships change dramatically (Allen, 2008). The adolescents' social world expands to include peers, romantic partners and social groups, and there is a progressive differentiation and diversification of the attachment behavioural system (Allen, 2008; Mayseless, 2005). Adolescents spend substantial time away from their parents, and show a decline in overt attachment behaviour such as seeking physical proximity to parents (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994; Kerns, Tomich, & Kim, 2006; Papini, Roggman, & Anderson, 1991). However, research suggests that the process of “transferring” attachment functions to peers and dating partners is a very complex and gradual one, and this developmental transition may be incomplete in early adolescence (Kerns, 2008). In fact, parents continue to function as primary attachment figures in early and perhaps late adolescence, for some attachment functions – specifically, “safe haven” (“who provides you with support when you are under stress?”) and “secure base” (“who do you know will always be there for you, no matter what?”) (Fraleigh & Davis, 1997; Hazan & Zeifman, 1994; Lewis, Feiring, & Rosenthal, 2000; Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, & Haggart, 2006; Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997). These findings may be interpreted in terms of changes in the regulation of the attachment behavioural system, from *proximity* of the attachment figure in early childhood to the *availability* of the attachment figure in middle and late childhood (see Bowlby; cited in Ainsworth, 1990; for empirical support, see Laursen & Collins, 2004; Lieberman, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 1999).

Securely attached adolescents show fewer mental health (internalizing) problems, including lower levels of depression, anxiety and feelings of personal inadequacy (Allen, Moore, Kuperminc, & Bell, 1998; DeKlyen & Greenberg, 2008; Lessard & Moretti, 1998; Wilkinson & Walford, 2001), and more adaptive coping strategies (Kobak, Cole, Ferenz-Gillies, Fleming, & Gamble, 1993). Moreover, securely attached adolescents are less likely to engage in externalizing problems, substance abuse, antisocial and aggressive behaviour, suicide attempts, and casual or risky sexual activity (e.g., Allen et al., 1998; Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Williams & Kelly, 2005). They also rate higher in terms of scholastic, emotional, and social adjustment, and enjoy more positive relationships with family and peers (Kerns, Klepac, & Cole, 1996; Papini & Roggman, 1992; Rubin et al., 2004; Simons, Paternite, & Shore, 2001). These findings suggest that attachment to both parents may have a role in both adolescents' internalizing and externalizing problem behaviours.

### *Social value orientation*

Along with the teenagers' rapidly growing capacities for formal operational thinking and enhanced self-awareness and understanding of others (Allen, 2008; Keating, 1990; Mayseless, 2005), adolescents develop broader mental representations, or “internal working models”, of self and others (Bowlby, 1980; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Therefore, some attachment-related dynamics may apply not only to parents and intimate people but also to social groups and “distant others” (Ainsworth, 1991; Bowlby, 1982; Lichtenberg, 1989; Smith, Murphy, & Coats, 1999; Waters & Cummings, 2000). Some authors have proposed that the internalization of the working models of self and others (positive or negative; see Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) may be associated with the development of social value orientations (e.g. Mikulincer et al., 2003; Van Lange, Otten, De Bruin, & Joireman, 1997). Social values are commonly characterized as relatively stable individual preferences (Rokeach, 1973) or desirable goals (Schwartz, 1992) that reflect socialization and serve as guiding principles in people's lives (Bilsky & Schwartz, 1994). According to Schwartz (1992; Schwartz et al., 2001), there are ten basic values that yield an integrated structure including two orthogonal dimensions. These dimensions go from “self-enhancement” values (achievement, power) to “self-transcendent” values (universalism, benevolence), and from “openness-to-change” values (self-direction, stimulation, hedonism) to “conservative” values (security, conformity, tradition).

Studies conducted in several countries found a strong positive correlation between stimulation/hedonism values and externalizing problem behaviours, including deviant behaviours, alcohol/substance abuse or risky sexual behaviour (Goff & Goddard, 1999; Liu et al., 2007; Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Melby, 1991). Unfortunately, most studies of social value orientation did not include early adolescents. This is regrettable since there is preliminary evidence that early adolescence is a crucial phase in the formation of a social value orientation. Given their growing moral reasoning and abstract thinking, teenagers may pursue values that differ from children and adults (Bubeck & Bilsky, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2001). The few studies that have been conducted suggest that early adolescents prioritize values of power, achievement, self-direction and stimulation (Liu et al., 2007; Schwartz et al., 2001). However, there are contrasting views on value structure in adolescence: for example, it is not clear if social value structure are less or more differentiated in adolescents than in adults (Bubeck & Bilsky, 2004). There is clearly a need for additional studies that explore social value orientation in early adolescence, and its implications for adolescents' risk-taking behaviour.

### *Sensation seeking*

Moreover, it should be stressed that some temperamental or dispositional factors (impulsivity, disinhibition, etc.), have been found to be linked with adolescents' risk-taking. In particular, sensation seeking – that is, “the need for varied, novel, and

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