



Self-reported attachment style, attachment quality, and symptoms of anxiety and depression in young adolescents

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Received 10 September 1999; received in revised form 8 March 2000; accepted 7 April 2000

Abstract

The Attachment Questionnaire for Children (AQ-C) is a simplified version of Hazan and Shaver's (1987) single-item measure of attachment style [Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, 511–524]. Briefly, children are provided with three descriptions concerning their feelings about and perception of relationships with other children. Children are instructed to choose the description that applies best to them. In this way, children classify themselves as either securely, avoidantly, or ambivalently attached. The present study investigated the validity of the AQ-C in a sample of 12–14 year-old adolescents ($N=155$). Participants were asked to complete the AQ-C, the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment as a measure of attachment quality, and scales of anxiety and depression. Results indicated that adolescents who classified themselves as securely attached displayed a higher quality of attachment than adolescents who classified themselves as insecurely (i.e. avoidantly or ambivalently) attached. Furthermore, securely attached adolescents scored significantly lower on anxiety and depression than insecurely attached adolescents. Altogether, these findings support the validity of the AQ-C. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Attachment style; Attachment quality; Anxiety; Depression; Adolescents

1. Introduction

Most developmental psychologists agree on the notion that there are three basic patterns of attachment. The first pattern of 'secure attachment' concerns children who use their caregiver as a secure base to regulate anxiety and distress when confronted with stressful stimuli or situations.

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The second pattern of 'avoidant attachment' refers to children who are unable to use their caregiver as a source of comfort to regulate negative affect: these children tend to avoid or ignore the caregiver. The third pattern of 'ambivalent attachment' involves children who make inconsistent and ambivalent attempts to use the caregiver when in distress: although these children sometimes cling excessively to the caregiver, they also display angry, rejective behaviours (Bukatko & Daehler, 1995).

It is generally assumed that insecure attachment (i.e. avoidant and ambivalent attachment) should be viewed as a risk factor for psychopathology (Rutter, 1990). It was Bowlby (1973) who proposed that children's level of anxiety might be affected by the way in which they are attached to their caregivers. Research has, indeed, shown that early attachment relationships are significant predictors of fear and anxiety in later childhood. For instance, in their longitudinal study, Warren, Huston, Egeland and Sroufe (1997) investigated whether insecurely attached children develop more anxiety disorders during childhood and adolescence than securely attached children. At 12 months of age, children were classified as either securely, avoidantly, or ambivalently attached using Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall's (1978) laboratory observation procedure. When children reached the age of 17.5 years, current and past anxiety disorders were assessed by means of a standardized interview instrument. Results showed that insecurely attached children more frequently displayed anxiety disorders than children who were securely attached. There is also abundant evidence that insecure attachment is involved in the etiology of child and adolescent depression. Studies in clinical and non-clinical samples indicate that insecurely attached children display higher levels of depressive symptoms than their securely attached counterparts (Kobak, Sudler & Gamble, 1991; Armsden, McCauley, Greenberg, Burke & Mitchell, 1990).

Hazan and Shaver (1987) developed a brief instrument to measure attachment patterns in adults. The instrument is based on the assumption that attachment is a stable personality characteristic that to a considerable extent defines affectionate relationships in later life. This implies that one can infer a person's attachment style from his perception of close relationships. Accordingly, Hazan and Shaver's (1987) Attachment Questionnaire (AQ) consists of descriptions concerning a person's feelings about and perceptions of his relationship to current significant others. There are three descriptions each referring to one of the attachment patterns described above. Adults are simply asked to choose one of the descriptions and thus classify themselves as being either securely, avoidantly, or ambivalently attached. Support for the validity of this measure comes from studies which have demonstrated the effects of AQ-defined attachment styles on adult relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1990; Collins & Read, 1990). Furthermore, adult subjects who classify themselves as insecurely (i.e. avoidantly and ambivalently) attached are consistently found to experience more distress in threatening situations (Mikulincer, Florian & Weller, 1993) and display higher levels of anxiety and depression (Priel & Shamai, 1995) than adults who classify themselves as securely attached.

Recently, several attempts have been made to adapt the AQ for use with children. Finzi, Har-Even, Weizman, Tyano and Shnit (1996) transformed the AQ descriptions into a 15-item questionnaire with five items referring to each of the three attachment styles. The psychometric properties of this instrument were tested in a large sample of primary school children. Results showed that the internal consistency and test-retest stability of the adapted AQ were satisfactory. Furthermore, AQ scores correlated as predicted with scores on measures of anxiety and depression. That is, children characterized by a secure attachment style scored low on anxiety and

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