



The symbolic content in adults' PPAT as related to attachment styles and achievement motivation



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ABSTRACT

The present study inquired into the symbolic content of PPAT (Gantt, 1990) in young adults aged 20–35 years as related to their attachment and achievement motivation. Symbolic contents in the drawings were measured by SC-PPAT/a: Symbolic Contents in PPAT/adults (Bat Or, Ishai, & Levi, 2014b), which codes content aspects of the drawn objects (person, tree, and person–tree relations). Attachment dimensions were measured by a self-reported questionnaire, experiences in close relationships scale (ECR) (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998); achievement motivation was measured by the achievement goals questionnaire (Elliot & Church, 1997). Although no significant correlations were found between SC-PPAT/a with the validating variables, meaningful associations were found after splitting the sample into attachment groups. For example, *secure individuals* tended to draw a coherent script of reciprocal relationships between person, tree, and apple/s that eased the picking task for the person, while *insecure individuals* tended to depict a mixed picture, containing contradicted contents with non-cooperating relations between the objects. Negative PPAT content aspects were found as related with performance goal and performance avoidance orientations within specific attachment groups. The results are discussed in light of attachment theory, projective drawings, and their implications to art therapy and art-based assessment research.

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Introduction

Naumburg (1966) has emphasized that putting mental representations into graphic form creates a space for the expression of clients' inner worlds. The objective of the present study was to trace the ways in which mental representations are expressed visually in content aspects of a single drawing, the person picking an apple from a tree (PPAT) (Gantt, 1990). Since in art therapy visual images are used to hold and communicate multiple and complex meanings (Robbins, 1994), a primary task in art-therapy research would be to explore the possible meanings of these images in terms of mental representations and subjective experience. Although PPAT drawings have mainly been researched through the prism of their formal art elements, specifically by the FEATS scoring system (Gantt & Tabone, 1998), there is accumulating evidence that PPAT content has meaningful relations to mental states (Rollins, 2005), executive functions, emotional states, and subjective experiences (Bat Or, Ishai, & Levi, 2014a).

Content level in the drawings

The content of a drawing provides the specific narrative/theme that can be seen. According to Vass (2012), content analysis concerns the way in which a drawing presents the observable image and its details. From the psychoanalytic perspective, the content of a drawing, similar to dreams, conveys multiple meanings (Segal, 1991) and might contain manifest and latent (hidden) content (Lusebrink, 1990). The images in the drawing might represent thinking, attitudes, emotions, and reflections about human situations and experience, as well as inner aspects (Milner, 1950).

In regard to PPAT (Gantt, 1990), individuals are asked to draw a specific theme—a person picking an apple from a tree. The PPAT task actually asks the individual to represent a person in the act of reaching a goal within an object-relation context (relations between at least three objects: a person, a tree, an apple). Since very few projecting drawings ask to represent a person in action (e.g., kinetic family drawing, KFD) (Burns & Kaufman, 1970), PPAT can be seen as a unique art-based assessment that taps into the perception of the self in the act of reaching a goal within an object-relations context. Though PPAT may shed light on multiple themes, there is still a need to explore it empirically by validating PPAT contents with mental representations, such as motivation and attachment.

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Attachment representations

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982) offers a developmental framework for understanding close relationships and psychological wellbeing (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Based on the history of interactions with attachment figures, internal working models of self and others serve as blueprints for the manner in which individuals form and maintain later close relationships (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1970), as well as how they initiate and sustain different coping strategies. Individuals differ in their quality of attachment, ranging from secure to insecure. Individuals who are raised by sensitive and responsive caregivers tend to develop secure attachment style, and as adults are more likely to be in satisfying close relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). They generally report greater trust, satisfaction, interdependence, and commitment in their relationships (e.g., Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Collins & Read, 1990). Less responsive caregiving may lead to the development of insecure attachment in their children, which is differentiated into two forms of attachment insecurity, either anxiety or avoidance (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Attachment anxiety refers to hyperactivation of the attachment system; specifically, it is characterized by fear of abandonment and preoccupation in relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Attachment avoidance refers to the deactivation of attachment needs. Avoidant individuals are often uncomfortable with emotional intimacy and with relying on others for support due to their negative views of others as untrustworthy or unsupportive. Adult researchers in the social tradition commonly conceptualize the quality of attachment in close relationships along two dimensions of attachment: avoidance and attachment anxiety (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Low scores on both avoidance and anxiety are taken to denote attachment security (Brennan et al., 1998). Individuals with high scores in both dimensions have been referred to as *fearful* and tend to respond to threatening conditions with contradictory behaviors: those designed to maximize support as well as interpersonal distancing behaviors (Simpson & Rholes, 2002). Many researchers agree that dimensional measures are more appropriate and precise (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002).

According to Bowlby (1980), attachment working models are not restricted to the experience of interpersonal relatedness, but influence “every situation we meet in life” (p. 229). We can thus suggest that a projective drawing that asks the individual to illustrate a relational system of a few objects might tap into her/his attachment representations. Since attachment theorists propose that attachment style affects the development of relationships, it may also affect the development of alliances between individuals, such as the working alliance (e.g., Kietaihl, 2012), that is, agreement on the tasks and the goals of therapy and establishing a personal bond (Bordin, 1979). Specifically, since secure attachment working models increase the likelihood of engaging others in more positive relationships (e.g., Fraley, Brumbaugh, and Marks, 2005; Holland & Roisman, 2010), it could be expected that it is more likely secure individuals would draw a cooperating system in their PPAT, in which the tree, which contains many apples, inclines toward the person, and the person is an active agent who approaches the tree. Conversely, it could be expected that insecure individuals might represent in their PPAT less cooperative object relations, for example, with the tree trunk inclined away from the person.

Furthermore, since PPAT task asks the individual to draw a person in the act of reaching a goal, it may also tap into the individuals' motivation to achieve.

Achievement motivation

Achievement motivation is a common feature of daily life, in which individuals strive to be competent in their effortful activities. From a social-cognitive perspective, people hold inner frameworks

for how they interpret, experience, and act in their achievement pursuits (Dweck, 1986). Three distinct orientations toward achievement have been identified: the *mastery goal orientation* focuses on the development of competence/task mastery. When adopted, it is presumed to lead to a “mastery” motivational pattern, for example, a preference for moderately challenging tasks, persistence in the face of failure, and enhanced task enjoyment (Ames, 1992; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Nicholls, 1989). The *performance goal orientation* is directed toward the demonstration of competence relevant to others and is hypothesized to produce susceptibility to a “helpless” pattern of responses in achievement settings (e.g., a preference for easy or difficult tasks, withdrawal of effort in the face of failure, and decreased task enjoyment); *performance avoidance* focuses on avoiding unfavorable judgments of competence (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996). The latter is presumably linked to fear of failure, which has been linked to reported anxiety, threat appraisal, negative outcome focus, and task distraction (Elliot & Church, 1997).

In a recent study (Elliot & Reis, 2003) that explored the link between attachment and competence motivations, secure attachment was found related with high need for achievement and low fear of failure. It was a positive predictor of approach personal goals and mastery approach goals, and was a negative predictor of performance avoidance goals. Conversely, insecure attachment was related with low need for achievement and high fear of failure, namely, it was a positive predictor of performance avoidance goals and was a negative predictor of approach personal goals and mastery approach goals.

In respect to the relationship between achievement motivation and PPAT, which strives to represent the topic of reaching a goal in a drawing, we expected to find positive correlations between mastery goals and PPAT content scales and negative correlations between PPAT content scales and performance avoidance and performance goal orientations.

Research questions and hypothesis

The main goal of the present study was to explore the relations between PPAT drawings and two validity variables: attachment representations and achievement motivation. Specifically, content aspects in the PPAT were rated by the SC-PPAT/a (Bat Or, Ishai, & Levi, 2014b) and associated statistically with validity variables. Two hypotheses were formulated:

1. Attachment security was expected to correlate positively with the aspects of PPAT that visualize cooperative relationships between the drawn objects (e.g., the more active the person, the more the tree trunk would incline toward the person), whereas insecurity was expected to illustrate non-cooperative relations within the PPAT content scales (e.g., the more active the person, the more the tree trunk would incline away from the person);
2. Positive correlations were expected between mastery goal orientation and PPAT content scales (e.g., success in picking the apple), and negative correlations were expected between PPAT content scales and performance avoidance and performance goal orientations (e.g., low degrees of contact between person and tree).

Method

Participants

The sample was composed of 215 young adults aged 20–35 (mean age = 29, *SD* = 3.56). The gender distribution of the sample was 61% females and 32% males; the remaining 7% did not provide

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