



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Journal of Adolescence

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jado



Culture-general and -specific associations of attachment avoidance and anxiety with perceived parental warmth and psychological control among Turk and Belgian adolescents[☆]

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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Adolescents
Peer attachment
Psychological control
Parental warmth
Attachment styles
Culture

Both the adolescent peer attachment and perceived parenting style literatures emphasize the role of the quality of the parent–child relationship in children's healthy adjustment beyond the family, but few studies have investigated links between adolescents' peer attachment and perceptions of parenting. We investigate relations of adolescents' perceptions of warmth and psychological control from parents with avoidance and anxiety in attachment to close friends in two contrasting cultures. Altogether, 262 Turk and 263 Belgian youth between 14 and 18 years of age participated. Cross-culturally, attachment avoidance was negatively related to maternal warmth, and attachment anxiety positively related to maternal and paternal control and negatively to paternal warmth. Beyond these general relations, attachment avoidance was associated with paternal psychological control in Belgians but not in Turks. The study provides cross-cultural evidence for specific relations between peer attachment and perceived parenting and suggests a culture-specific pathway for the development of attachment avoidance.

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Adolescence is a time during which children explore intimate, supportive relationships and develop mutual attachments outside the family (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Throughout adolescence, peers (as close friends or as romantic partners) become increasingly important for attachment functions, for example, as close and secure confidants to turn to in times of stress (Allen & Land, 1999). As a gradual shift of primary attachment from parents to peers occurs (Fraley & Davis, 1997), parents remain central in lives of adolescents. From attachment perspective, representations of interactions with parents form the basis of individual differences in attachment security in childhood and continue to do so in later ages in relationships with others (e.g., Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003). In fact, the quality of peer attachment is believed to depend heavily on the quality of relationships with parents (e.g., Dekovic & Meeus, 1997).

From the perspective of research linking parenting styles to child outcomes, however, adolescents' experiences of the ways their parent's parent have been shown to be important for youth (e.g., Barber, Stolz, & Olsen, 2005; Khaleque & Rohner, 2002). On this basis, one might expect individual differences in adolescents' attachment to peers to be closely related to experiences with different parenting styles. That said, research relating perceived parenting to peer attachment is lacking, which is

[☆] Preparation of this article was supported by the EU Marie Curie International Fellowship awarded to Derya Güngör and by the Intramural Research Program of the NIH, NICHD. Special thanks to Dr. Nebi Sümer for his earlier contribution to this study.

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especially regrettable in light of more and more refined conceptualizations of each of these constructs through recent decades. Our goal was to begin to fill this gap by evaluating specific features of attachment to peers and perceived parenting from a parsimonious framework and in a culturally comparative way. Juxtaposing the central dimensions of each construct may open the way to more advanced and revealing explanations of parenting-related factors associated with optimal functioning in key relationships during adolescence. The cross-cultural contrast permits insight into the degree to which findings about hypothesized links between parenting and attachment can be generalized.

In research on attachment in adolescence, mainstream focus has fallen on mother–adolescent relationships, hence “there is a glaring absence of literature about teen–father relationships” (Day & Acock, 2004, p. 277). Although the experience of love and concern from fathers is as important in the psychosocial development and well-being of adolescents as is that from mothers (see Rohner & Veneziano, 2001, for a review), this relationship has been much less studied, and relatively little work has included assessments of mothers and fathers simultaneously (e.g., Soenens et al., 2005). Still unexplored too are specific adolescent outcomes associated with fathering dimensions in non-Western societies where parental roles and father–child relationships differ from those in the Western context (Bornstein & Lansford, 2009). For example, fathers in non-Western cultures, such as in Chinese and Turkish societies are seen as authority figures whose restrictive control is goal-oriented and more expected (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1970; Yang et al., 2003). Therefore, we collected data on adolescents’ perceptions of mothering and fathering in both non-Western (Turkey) and Western (Belgium) societies.

From attachment to parenting dimensions

Researchers agree that attachment styles can best be conceptualized as falling along two distinct dimensions, an *avoidance* dimension that reflects interpersonal distance and an *anxiety* dimension that represents the degree of fear of rejection and dependence on others for approval and self-worth (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Mikulincer et al., 2003). Research on adolescent attachment in relationships with close friends and romantic partners has shown that avoidance is positively linked to outcomes such as reluctance to seek proximity and intimacy with others, compulsive self-reliance, distrust of others, indifference to others’ problems, perceiving others as not supportive, and low self-disclosure (e.g., Brennan et al., 1998; Kobak & Sceery, 1988; Sümer & Güngör, 1999a). By contrast, anxiety is associated with dependence on others’ confirmation and acceptance for self-worth, affect-regulation problems such as extreme emotional reactions, spread of negative emotions and memories, low satisfaction with the support and concern of others, jealousy and intervention, and excessive proximity seeking (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan et al., 1998; Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995). Adolescents’ attachment anxiety is also closely linked to internalizing problems, such as self-reported depression (Allen, Moore, Kuperminc, & Bell, 1998). Accordingly, we assessed attachment avoidance and anxiety in relationships with close friends among two culturally contrasting samples of adolescents, Belgians and Turks, and defined secure attachment in terms of relatively low level avoidance and anxiety (Brennan et al., 1998).

Research on adolescent attachment and adult memories of early experiences has revealed that adolescents high on avoidance report their parents as rejecting, cold, unengaged, and distant; adolescents high on anxiety describe their parents as overprotective, intrusive, and overcontrolling (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kobak & Sceery, 1988; Levy, Blatt, & Shaver, 1998). Hence, the main theme in parental representations of avoidant and anxious individuals seems to be differential levels of behaviors which are akin to two dimensions of perceived parenting styles—parental warmth and parental psychological control, respectively. *Warmth* includes acceptance, engagement, and responsiveness; parents high on this dimension show affectionate intimacy, acceptance, involvement, and love in the eye of their children (Rohner, 1986). *Psychological control* is related to dominating the child’s psychological world through intrusion, love withdrawal, and expecting absolute compliance (Barber, 1996). As we detail below, it is evident in cross-cultural research that the experience of warmth has universal significance for healthy adjustment (Rohner, 1986), but the meaning, and thus consequences, of psychological control vary depending on whether it is perceived in the context of warmth or not. That being said, too little attention has been paid to psychological control in the context of warmth (Doyle & Markiewicz, 2005). Therefore, it is important to determine culture-general and -specific patterns of relations between perceived psychological control and adolescent outcomes to develop more a precise understanding of the meaning of psychological control.

From parenting to attachment dimensions

Studies of perceived warmth and psychological control have yielded remarkably consistent findings in terms of correlates. Cross-culturally, warmth has been shown to be positively associated with healthy adolescent adjustment across cultures (see Khaleque & Rohner, 2002, for a meta-analysis) and particularly with social initiative and positive attitudes towards interpersonal interaction (e.g., Barber et al., 2005), which is reminiscent of the defining characteristic of individuals who are low on attachment avoidance. Barber et al. accounted for this link with reference to attachment theory in which supportive parenting promotes the development of positive expectations about self and others, which in turn facilitates positive interactions with the social environment.

By contrast, perception of high psychological control seems to be distinctively linked to attachment anxiety-related problems, mainly to internalization such as depression, anxious symptomology, somatization, and low self-confidence (Barber, 1996; Barber et al., 2005; Conger, Conger, & Scaramella, 1997). Moreover, the link between psychological control and adolescent internalization is robust across cultures (see Sorkhabi, 2005, for a review). For example, psychological control, as

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