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Attachment styles, interpersonal relationships and psychotic phenomena in a non-clinical student sample

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Abstract

This paper describes the development and initial validation of a measure of adult attachment styles based on Bartholomew's (1990, 1997) model and adapted for use with individuals with psychosis. The associations between the new measure, interpersonal problems, self-concept, relationships with significant others during childhood, traumatic life events and non-clinical psychotic phenomena were examined in a student sample. Three hundred and twenty three students completed study measures via an internet website. In support of the construct validity of the measure, insecure attachment styles were associated with interpersonal problems and anxiety in attachment relationships was associated with low self-esteem. There were weak but significant associations between insecure attachment and more negative experiences of being parented. There was no evidence of associations between attachment and traumatic life events. As predicted, there were significant associations between insecure attachment and non-clinical psychotic phenomena; positive psychotic phenomena were associated with anxiety in attachment relationships, and social anhedonia with avoidance in attachment relationships. Findings suggest that the attachment measure is a valid instrument with good internal consistency, and can be used to explore associations between attachment styles and psychotic symptoms in clinical samples.

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1. Introduction

Recent models of psychosis implicate earlier experiences with significant others and interpersonal traumas in the development and maintenance of psychotic symptoms (Garety, Kuipers, Fowler, Freeman, & Bebbington, 2001). Since the seminal work of Bowlby (1982) on early childhood attachments, much research has suggested that earlier interpersonal experiences influence attachments to others in adulthood, and adult attachment styles predict interpersonal functioning, self-esteem and psychopathology (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Platts, Tyson, & Mason, 2002). Psychosis is associated with interpersonal difficulties (Penn et al., 2004) and low self-esteem (Barrowclough et al., 2003). Attachment theory may therefore provide a useful framework for conceptualizing the influence of interpersonal relationships on the development and course of psychosis (Dozier, Stovall, & Albus, 1999). There is, however, currently limited empirical research investigating attachment styles and their correlates in clinical samples (Goodwin, 2003) and there are difficulties assessing the attachment styles of patients with psychosis with available measures.

Interview attachment measures, such as the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; Main & Goldwyn, 1984) assess attachment states of mind on the basis of the individual's coherence of narrative in describing parenting experiences. Such measures are time consuming to complete, require extensive training, and, when administered to individuals with psychosis, may be confounded by the presence of psychotic symptoms (Dozier et al., 1999). Self-report attachment measures, although easier to administer, tend to focus on close interpersonal relationships with some items referring specifically to romantic relationships. They may therefore be less relevant to individuals with psychosis, who are often socially isolated (Randolph, 1998). Cognitive problems associated with psychosis may also make it difficult for patients to understand negatively worded items and rate themselves on scales with relatively wide-ranging Likert scales and few anchor points (Kelly, Sharkey, Morrison, Allardyce, & McCreadie, 2000). There is therefore a need to develop and validate a measure of attachment that is more appropriate for use with this group.

Two dimensions have been found to underlie self-report measures (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998), which can be conceptualized in cognitive terms as: 'model of self' and 'model of other'; or affective and behavioural terms as: 'anxiety' and 'avoidance' (Crowell, Fraley, & Shaver, 1999). Attachment anxiety is associated with a negative self-image and an excessive need for approval from others, coupled with a fear of rejection and abandonment. Attachment avoidance is associated with a negative image of others and is defined in terms of either an excessive need for self-reliance or a fear of depending on others.

Bartholomew (1990, 1997) has also described these dimensions in terms of four prototypes: secure; fearful; dismissing; and preoccupied (see Fig. 1). Preoccupied and fearful attachment styles, which are characterized by high anxiety in attachment relationships, have been associated with low self-esteem (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Collins & Read, 1990). Dismissing attachment, characterized by low anxiety but high avoidance, has been associated with hostility, interpersonal coldness and emotional detachment. Preoccupied attachment, characterized by high anxiety and

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