

Contribution of Attachment in Children's Separation Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

Literature suggests that child attachment and anxiety symptoms are related. The purpose of the present study was to assess whether attachment patterns related differently to separation anxiety symptoms (fear of being alone, and fear of abandonment). Three attachment patterns assessed were secure, avoidant and ambivalent attachment. The findings indicated that ambivalent attachment was related with higher separation anxiety symptoms ($r=.57$) compared to avoidant attachment ($r=.53$). More so, ambivalent attachment was also related to the fear of abandonment ($r=.52$), while avoidant attachment was related with the fear of being alone ($r=.63$). In conclusion, consistently responsive mothers are always receptive and supportive of their children's mental health.

Key words: Attachment, separation anxiety, avoidance, ambivalence

INTRODUCTION

Separation anxiety is defined as a negative emotion or feeling like loneliness, lose or sadness experienced when children are separated from their attachment figure (APA, 2000; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999). The concept also refers to a developmental stage when children experience anxiety due to separation from a primary caregiver, usually the mother (Spencer, 2006). Theoretically, separation anxiety in infants is a natural process in development, which helps their survival (Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby (1969) proposed that those infants who experienced separation from a caregiver demonstrated some behaviour characteristics like crying, chasing, calling and protesting. The goal of these tantrums is to end separation and permit a return to close proximity with the caregiver.

Bowlby (1973) further explained that insecure attachment could often result when an

attachment relationship was threatened, or the attachment figure was not consistently available. Bowlby (1969) proposed that children's level of anxiety might be affected by their level of attachment with their caregivers. Ambivalently attached children were constantly afraid of being alone and in danger, because their caregivers were unreliable concerning their needs (Bowlby, 1973; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Kerns, Abraham, Schlegelmilch & Morgan, 2007), whereas avoidant children learned not to expect comfort from their caregivers, thereby internalizing their distress, conflicting feeling, and confusion about their relationship (Goldberg, 1997; Greenberg, 1999; Manassis, 2001; Manassis & Bradley, 1994). Pursuant to inconsistent and conflicting dyadic interaction, ambivalent children were usually overwhelmed by the constant anxiety of getting their needs met (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999).

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On the other hand, according to etiological models of anxiety (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998), children with ambivalent attachment are assumed to develop perception of autonomy that is impeded by parental difficulty in times of separation. These types of children may perceive the environment as uncontrollable, based on their parents' unpredictable behaviours. In other words, parents' dismissive behaviours are the causes of avoidant attachment which leads to the development of negative self evaluation among children (Cassidy, 1999; Rohner, 2004).

Studies indicate that sense of security consists of a set of expectations about availability and responsiveness to others in times of stress (Bar-Haim, Dan, Eshel & Sagi-Schwartz, 2007; Bohlin, Hagekull & Rydell, 2000; Dallaire & Weinraub, 2005). Secure attachment in infancy is considered to be a protective factor for later mental health, while insecure attachment is considered to a risk factor for the development of psychopathology (Brown & Whiteside, 2008; Wenar & Kerig, 2000). Although ambivalent attachment has been theoretically implicated in setting the stage for the later development of anxiety disorders (Bowlby, 1973; Van-Emmichoven, Van-Ijzendoorn, DeRuiter & Brosschot, 2003), supportive research data are surprisingly limited (Greenberg, 1999). The study by Bar-Haim *et al.* (2007) revealed that ambivalent attachment was not related to anxiety levels in a normal sample of children.

The study focused on two dimensions of separation anxiety, namely, the fear of being alone and the fear of abandonment. The main objective was to discover the symptoms of separation anxiety are associated with avoidant and/or ambivalent attachment.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study is a correlation research which investigated the pattern of the relationship between variables. In particular, the study examined the relationship between separation anxiety symptoms and attachment patterns amongst Iranian children.

Sample and Procedure

A sample of 120 children (54% boys and 55% girls) was randomly selected from public schools in Bushehr, Iran, to participate in the study. The age of the children, as reported by the respondents, ranged from 6 to 8 years. All the children were interviewed individually in a private classroom for the purpose of completing the instruments. The interviewer read out the questionnaire items loudly and had each response recorded. This was to ensure that the reading ability of the children would not affect their capacity to understand the questions.

Measures

Attachment Questionnaire - Child version (AQC): The AQC (Muris, Meesters, Merckelbach & Hulsenbeck, 2000) is an instrument for measuring attachment patterns. The AQC is based on the assumption that attachment to a considerable extent defines affectionate relationships. This implies that one can infer attachment style from children's perception of close relationships. The respondents determine that each item fits their characteristic style in their relationship. The AQC consists of three descriptions that correspond with three basic patterns of attachment: (1) "I find it easy to become close friends with other children. I trust them and I am comfortable depending on them. I do not worry about being abandoned or about another child getting too close friends with me" (secure attachment); (2) "I am uncomfortable to be close friends with other children. I find it difficult to trust them completely and difficult to depend on them. I get nervous when another child wants to become close friends with me. Friends often come more close to me than I want them to" (avoidant attachment); and (3) "I often find that other children do not want to get as close as I would like them to be. I am often worried that my best friend doesn't really like me and wants to end our friendship. I prefer to do everything together with my best friend; however this desire sometimes scares other children away" (ambivalent attachment).

A previous study by Muris, Merckelbach, Kindt, Bogels, Dreesen and Dorp (2001) provided support for the validity of the AQC. In the present study, the scales yielded high internal consistencies of 0.89 (secure), 0.93 (avoidant) and 0.89 (ambivalent). The mean alpha for the six sub-scales was 0.90. Separation Anxiety Assessment Scale-Child version (SAAS-C) is a 34-item measure designed to assess separation anxiety and related anxiety symptoms (Hahn, Hajinlian, Eisen, Winder & Pincus, 2003). SAAS-C was designed to assess the four key dimensions of separation anxiety, which include fear of being alone (FBA; e.g., "How often are you afraid to sleep alone at night?"), fear of abandonment (FAB; e.g., "How often are you afraid to go on a play date at a new friend's home?"), fear of physical illness (FPI; e.g., "How often are you afraid to go to school if you feel sick?") and worry about calamitous events (WCE; e.g., "How often do you worry that bad things will happen to you?") (Eisen & Schaefer, 2005). FBA and FAB are considered the avoidance dimension for separation anxiety.

Meanwhile, FPI and WCE are considered as the maintenance dimensions of the SAAS-C. For example, children may fear the physical sensation of nausea because of the potential consequence of vomiting. Children with separation anxiety experience frequent and

intense somatic complaints (Last, 1991). The Cronbach's alpha of the SAAS-C for each subscale of FBA, FAB, FPI, and WCE was 0.93, 0.90, 0.83, and 0.82, respectively. In the current study, the mean alpha for the four sub-scales was 0.86.

RESULTS

The mean and standard deviation for separation anxiety scale were 75.6 and 12.6, respectively; this is followed by secure attachment (M=1.5, SD=.14), avoidant (M=1.2, SD=.25) and ambivalent (M=1.2, SD=.29). When the final distribution of the children attachment classification was calculated, the findings revealed that the children fell into three attachment categories, namely, secure (57%), avoidant (15%), and ambivalent (28%). Based on the SAAS-C cut-off point score, the children were classified into two groups. The results indicated that only 35% of the children displayed the symptoms of separation anxiety. In addition, 59.5% of the children who showed separation anxiety symptom were ambivalent, 26.5% were avoidant, and 14 % were securely attached.

Pearson Product correlation was conducted to test this relationship. As depicted in Table 1, there is a negative correlation between children separation anxiety and securely attached children

TABLE 1
Correlations among the variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. SAASc	75.57	12.64	1.000	.894**	.850**	.459**	.904**	-.658**	.528**	.566**
2. FBA	12.56	3.27		1.000	.779**	.229*	.788**	-.643**	.626**	.535**
3. FAB	11.46	2.99			1.000	.237**	.653**	-.527**	.466**	.516**
4. FPI	10.19	1.51				1.000	.425**	-.150	.068	.200*
5. WCE	12.00	2.97					1.000	-.637**	.611**	.596**
6. Secure	1.46	.14						1.000	-.855**	-.839**
7. Avoidant	1.19	.25							1.000	.604**
8. Ambivalent	1.24	.29								1.000

Note: FBA (fear of being alone); FAB (fear of abandonment); FPI (fear of physical illness); WCE (worry about calamitous events).

** Correlation is significant at 0.01 level;

* Correlation is significant at 0.05 level.

($r = -0.66, p < .01$), as well as between positive correlation with avoidant ($r = 0.61, p < .01$) and ambivalently attached children ($r = 0.57, p < .01$).

To determine the contributions of both avoidant and ambivalent attachments to the two dimensions of separation anxiety, the multiple regression analysis was conducted with SAAS-C score as a dependent variable and two attachment patterns (avoidant and ambivalent) as the predictors. Both the P-P plots (expected cumulative probability by observed cumulative probability) showed no significant deviation from the fitted line. This finding indicated that the relationship between the dependent variable and the predictors is linear, and that the residual variances are about equal or constant.

The findings on regression analysis for the Fear of Being Alone (FBA) symptom indicated that the two predictor models are able to account for 43% of the variance in the FBA symptom ($R^2 = 0.43, F_{(2,117)} = 44.3, p < .001$). The results also revealed that avoidant attachment ($\beta = .48, p < .01$) and ambivalent attachment ($\beta = .25, p < .05$) explained modest but significant and unique proportions of the variance in the FBA symptom.

In terms of Fear of Abandonment (FAB) symptom, the findings indicated that the model accounted for 30% of the variance in the FAB symptom ($R^2 = .30, F_{(2,117)} = 25.51, p < .001$). Once again, both avoidant attachment ($\beta = .24, p < .05$) and ambivalent attachment ($\beta = .37, p < .01$) explained significant and unique proportions of the variance in the FAB symptom. The results presented in Table 2 reveal that the strong predictor for FBA is avoidant attachment, while that for FAB is ambivalent attachment.

DISCUSSION

Conceivably, the most interesting result of this study is the relationship between attachment classification and separation anxiety symptoms in children. Avoidant and ambivalently attached children significantly reported separation anxiety symptoms, but securely attached children showed significantly negative correlation with separation anxiety symptoms. The finding is in line with the hypothesis that children classified as insecurely attached would report more separation anxiety symptoms compared to those classified as secured (Brown & Whiteside, 2008). This result was expected based on attachment theory, with securely attached children exhibiting less anxious behaviour, while insecurely attached children displayed more symptoms of separation anxiety.

Furthermore, a link between insecure attachment and separation anxiety revealed that insecure attachment constituted a general risk factor in the development of anxiety (Bowlby, 1973). The findings of the current study have extended the previous findings by distinguishing the types of insecure attachment (avoidant and ambivalent) and anxiety in children. The relationship between insecure attachment and separation anxiety symptoms is consistent with that of the previous findings which suggest that secure attachment is negatively associated with childhood anxiety (Brown & Whiteside, 2008; Muris, Meesters & Brakel, 2003; Muris *et al.*, 2001).

The results also revealed that the unique predictor for the fear of abandonment is ambivalent attachment and this is avoidant

TABLE 2
Results of the Regression Analysis with Two Dimensions of Separation Anxiety as the Dependent Variable and Attachment Patterns as the Predictors

Dependent	Predictors	R	R ²	F	p	B (SE)	β	p
FBA	Avoidant	.66	.43	44.30	.000	6.22(1.14)	.477	.000
	Ambivalent					2.69(.96)	.247	.006
FAB	Avoidant	.55	.30	25.51	.000	2.89(1.15)	.242	.014
	Ambivalent					3.69(.97)	.370	.000

Note: FBA (fear of being alone); FAB (fear of abandonment)

attachment for the fear of being alone. According to the attachment theory, ambivalently attached infants are particularly prone to developing chronic levels of anxiety later in life because ambivalent attachment has been associated with patterns of unpredictable and irregular responsiveness to the caregiver; it is believed that ambivalently attached infants live with the constant fear of being left vulnerable and alone. This fear of separation or abandonment is thought to give rise to a coping strategy centred on chronic vigilance, which may continue throughout childhood and adulthood and lead to the development of anxiety disorders (Bowlby, 1973).

The finding supported the current theoretical conceptualizations that a child with ambivalent attachment may be more relevant when examining outcomes linked to the types of insecurity. Studies have also shown that infants classified as ambivalent are more susceptible to later problems than those in other categories, and are also more likely to suffer from internalizing behaviour (Brown & Whiteside, 2008; Hudson & Rapee, 2001). According to Van-Emmichoven *et al.* (2003), insecure individuals may be more prone to anxious feelings because they attend more to anxiety-provoking cues in the environment.

In addition, this finding also revealed that avoidant children showed more distress in term of the fear of being alone. In the case of avoidant attachment, Manassis (2001) proposed that children feel rejected by their parent at times of distress, resulting in excessive self-reliance, and a decreased desire for social contact. Avoidance of social contacts impairs the development of coping strategies for effective arousal in social situations (e.g. entering school) and prevents the exposure to perceived threats which, together with temperamental vulnerability to sympathetic arousal, increase the risk for anxiety, especially for social phobia (Manassis & Bradley, 1994). Similarly, Goldberg (1997) proposed that avoidant children, who learn to repress their feelings and needs, appear to display internalizing problems in which they experience pain and

distress but rarely disturb others (e.g. depression, anxiety, or social withdrawal). Research has also indicated that close relationships serve as a defence against existential anxiety for people with secure attachment styles. Developmentally and functionally, insecure attachment keeps the child physically and psychologically yearning to be close to their parents. However, hyper-anxiety and throwing of tantrums paradoxically separate the child from the caregivers.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study have revealed that secure attachment is associated with lower separation anxiety. The more responsive a mother is to the child's needs, the more likely the child is to develop secure attachment. Securely attached children do not often worry about being abandoned or being alone. According to Cassidy (1999), infants are completely dependent on their caregivers, and they frequently signal their distress. The overall findings of this research have highlighted the importance of examining children's separation anxiety symptoms within the confines of their attachment relationships. Separation anxiety symptoms were found to be highest among ambivalent as compared with avoidantly attached children.

Nonetheless, the results should be interpreted cautiously due to some limitations. The age of the children assessed in the current study was 6 to 8 years, which is the most common age of the onset for separation anxiety (APA, 2000). It was assumed that these children were able to get or bring back information about the behaviours of their parents. In the case that it may not be true, this may lead to prejudgment. A further limitation for this research was the size of the sample. Although the total sample size that completed the questionnaires was reasonable, the overall sample size for a factor analysis was less than ideal. More so, the respondents in any study come with their own opinions, attitudes or perceptions.

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