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Research article

A study of associations among attachment patterns, maltreatment, and behavior problem in institutionalized children in Japan

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigates the relationships among children's history of maltreatment, attachment patterns, and behavior problems in Japanese institutionalized children. Twenty-nine children (12 boys and 17 girls) from three different institutions in the Kinki area (Western part of Japan) participated in this study. Their average age was 6.41-years (ranging from 4 to 10). Thirteen of the children (44.8%) had history of maltreatment before they were institutionalized. Children's attachment was assessed by the Attachment Doll Play Assessment (George & Solomon, 1990, 1996, 2000). The child's main caregiver answered the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Archenbach, 1991) to identify children's behavior problems. Results indicated a significant relationship between maltreatment history and attachment pattern. The relationship between attachment pattern and behavior problem was also confirmed. Implications and limitations of this study were discussed.

1. Introduction

Child abuse and neglect are on the rise in Japanese society. According to the [Japan Ministry of Health, Labour & Welfare report \(2014\)](#), the number of incidents of child abuse dealt with by the Consultation Office for Children was 66,701 in 2012, a number that is 5.7 times greater than in 1999. After the Consultation Office for Children receives the report of child maltreatment, they investigate the incident and initiate the process to determine whether it is necessary to remove a child from his/her parent(s) to protect the child. Since foster care is not common in Japan, when a decision is made to separate the child from his/her parent(s), the child will be sent to an institution called “*Nyuji In*” (in case of infants and toddlers) or “*Jido Yogo Shisetsu*” (when the child is above 2- or 3-years-old). The child will be institutionalized until his/her parent(s) can provide proper care to him/her.

Despite a decrease in the total number of children in Japan, the number of children living in residential foster care facilities (*Nyuji In* and *Jido Yogo Shisetsu*) is increasing, especially the number of children with the experience of being abused and/or neglected. The results of a survey on institutionalized children in 2008 showed that more than half of the children (53.4%) living in the “*Jido Yogo Shisetsu*” have experiences of maltreatment before being institutionalized. Neglect is the most common type of maltreatment (66.2%) followed by physical abuse (39.8%) among the institutionalized children ([Japan Ministry of Health, Labour & Welfare, 2014](#)). Thus, the institutionalized children experienced not only separation from their parents but many of them had also experienced maltreatment by their parents as well.

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1.1. Attachment of institutionalized children

Children in residential foster care facilities underwent separation from their parents and may have been suffering feelings of loss since the separation. In addition, the environment of institutions does not make it easy for such children to establish secure attachment to a specific caregiver due to the regimented nature of institutions, high child-to-caregiver ratio and frequent changes of caregiver (Bakermans-Kranenburg, Dobrova-Krol, & van IJzendoorn, 2012). As a matter of fact, studies on attachment of institutionalized preschoolers in Japan and Ukraine indicated that institutionalized children had much lower rate of secure pattern of attachment and higher rate of disorganized pattern than did home-reared children (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2012; Katsurada, 2007). This result was supported by a meta-analysis of attachment in institutionalized children (Lionetti, Pastore, & Barone, 2015).

Although there have been some studies on comparison of attachment between institutionalized children and their home-reared counterparts, there have been only a few studies focusing on only institutionalized children. The present study focused on the comparison of abusive experience in terms of attachment and behavioral problems among the institutionalized children.

1.2. Child maltreatment and attachment

Maltreatment of a child by one or both parents affects the quality of attachment that a child develops. Bowlby (1969/1982) stated that the sensitivity of the attachment figure in response to the baby's signals and amount and nature of interaction between the child and the attachment figure would contribute to the formation of attachment. From observations of mother-infant interactions, Crittenden (1981) found that neglecting mothers were very distant and unresponsive to their infants. She also found that abusive mothers responded to their infants according to their original plan regardless of their infants' cues. Judging from these different responses of abusive or neglecting mothers, the quality of attachment of maltreated children would differ from that of non-maltreated children.

Meta-analyses of the studies on attachment and child maltreatment reveal a clear association between maltreatment experiences and the disorganized attachment pattern (Baer & Martinez, 2006; Cyr, Euser, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van IJzendoorn, 2010). From review of individual studies, however, it seems that the association is only clear-cut when the target children are infants, but it is not necessarily so for preschoolers. After the disorganized attachment type was introduced in the classification of the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) by Main and Solomon (1990), many studies have shown the link between child maltreatment and disorganized attachment. Carlson, Cicchetti, Barnett and Braunwald (1989) assessed the quality of attachment of 22 maltreated infants and 21 comparison infants using the SSP, and found that majority (81.8%) of the maltreated group was classified as disorganized type, whereas only 19.1% of the comparison group was disorganized type. In an intervention study for maltreated infants and their mothers (Cicchetti, Rogsch, & Toth, 2006), a slightly higher rate (approximately 88%) of the disorganized-type was reported at the baseline attachment classification.

On the other hand, when the target child's age is higher (i.e. older than infants and toddlers), such a link is not so evident. Consistent with the results of the infant and toddler studies, a study of preschoolers with an average age of 4 years old indicated a significantly higher rate of disorganized attachment in the maltreated group than in the non-maltreated group (Stronach et al., 2011).

In contrast, Cicchetti & Barnett's longitudinal study (1991) indicated that at the age of 30-month assessment, maltreated children were more likely to be A/C and D types than non-maltreated children, whereas such difference was not found at the age of 36- and 48-month assessment. Using the Family Drawings as an assessment of children's attachment patterns, Shiakou (2012) found that drawings of maltreated Greek children aged from 5 to 11 years old included more items linked to an insecure attachment, not specifically disorganized pattern, compared to those of non-maltreated children. Another study of neglected preschoolers conducted in Canada also showed that the proportion of avoidant type was significantly higher in neglected children than control children, but there was no such difference in disorganized type (Venet, Bureau, Gosselin, & Capuano, 2007). Venet et al.'s study employed a representational measurement of attachment, the Attachment Doll Play Assessment, and Shiakou's study (2012) used Family Drawings, which may contribute to produce a different result. Thus, the association between disorganized attachment and child maltreatment should be further investigated in preschool age and/or older children.

1.3. Attachment and behavioral problems

Disorganized attachment is also related to children's behavioral problems. Meta-analysis of over 60 studies on attachment and externalizing behavior problems supported the hypothesis that attachment disorganization would predict externalizing behaviors later in childhood (Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010). This meta-analysis, however, only included studies employing the SSP and other observational methods, but did not include studies using representational measures to assess children's attachment patterns. Another meta-analysis on 12 studies involving a total of 734 participants also confirmed that disorganized attachment at younger age predicted later externalized behaviors (van IJzendoorn, Schuengel, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1999). In this meta-analysis, it was reported that the mean age of attachment assessment was 39 months and that of problem behavior assessment was 59 months, but the attachment assessment measures of the included studies were not reported. As indicated by these meta-analyses, the association between infants' disorganized attachment assessed by behavioral measures and later externalized behaviors was clear-cut. However, the association between older children's (i.e. preschoolers') attachment assessed by representational methods and concurrent externalized behavior problem is not convincing.

Employing the representational method of attachment assessment (the Attachment Doll Play Assessment; ADPA), Solomon, George and De Jong (1995) found that kindergarten children with disorganized attachment pattern were described by their mothers

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