



Research paper

Adult attachment style and anxiety – The mediating role of emotion regulation



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ABSTRACT

Background: Although there is substantial evidence for the role of emotion regulation in the etiology and maintenance of anxiety disorders, knowledge about what contributes to emotion dysregulation is sparse. Attachment style is related to emotion regulation and anxiety symptoms, but these variables have rarely been examined together. Examining emotion dysregulation within the context of anxiety disorders through an attachment theory framework will lead to a better understanding of the etiology and maintenance of anxiety disorders. In the present study we combined theoretically and empirically derived knowledge to examine the mediating role of emotion regulation between attachment dimensions (avoidance and anxiety) and anxiety symptoms.

Methods: A total of 147 individuals were assessed with Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI), Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) and Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS), and statistical mediation analyses were conducted.

Results: Our results indicate that the significant association between anxiety and attachment anxiety was mediated by emotion dysregulation, whereas attachment avoidance was not significantly related to anxiety when covarying for attachment anxiety. The primary limitation of our study is that data is cross-sectional and so causation cannot be inferred. Secondly, all measures used in this study were derived from self-reported questionnaires, which may be more susceptible to bias.

Conclusions: Our results suggest that it is not insecure attachment in general that is important in anxiety disorders, but that attachment anxiety is specifically relevant. Thus, clinical interventions for anxiety disorders may improve by targeting attachment related difficulties.

1. Introduction

The etiology and maintenance of anxiety disorders are complex and multifactorial. In recent years, researchers have begun to focus on what role emotion dysregulation plays in anxiety disorders. Emotion regulation is a multifaceted concept that refers to various strategies and processes for regulating emotions (Gross and Thompson, 2007). Several theorists have proposed that anxiety disorders are the result of emotion dysregulation (Campbell-Sills and Barlow, 2007; Gross and Muñoz, 1995; Mennin et al., 2007). The association between emotion dysregulation and anxiety disorders has been empirically established (Amstadter, 2008; Cisler et al., 2010; Cisler and Olatunji, 2012) and recent models of anxiety disorders (Hofmann et al., 2012; Kashdan and

Breen, 2008; Mennin et al., 2005) have highlighted the central role of emotion regulation. Several of the underlying cognitive and behavioral factors that maintain anxiety disorders (e.g. avoidance, worrying and suppression) can be conceptualized as subfacets of a larger system of emotion dysregulation. The core components of anxiety disorders and emotion regulation are indeed distinct constructs, but certain patterns, for instance when a person tries to disengage from fear stimuli (as opposed to approach behavior), may be conceptualized as a maladaptive kind of emotion regulation.

Despite this consistent evidence linking emotion dysregulation and anxiety disorders, little is known about the precursors of emotion dysregulation or what contributes to emotion dysregulation in anxiety disorders (Cisler and Olatunji, 2012). The body of research linking

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emotion regulation and anxiety disorders has largely neglected a critical correlate of emotion dysregulation, namely attachment style. Recent theory suggests that adult insecure attachment style may be a maintaining factor of anxiety (Cassidy et al., 2009; Nolte et al., 2011), but how insecure attachment is related to anxiety symptoms in adults is not well understood. The present study investigates adult attachment, anxiety symptoms, and the mediating role of emotion dysregulation. This line of research can contribute to the understanding of the etiology and maintenance of anxiety disorders and thus inform the development of more targeted anxiety treatments with components that directly address attachment style and emotion dysregulation.

1.1. Attachment and the regulatory processes of emotions

Adult anxiety disorders may be partly rooted in childhood experiences in which the child is uncertain of the availability of a protective figure in times of distress (Bowlby, 1982; Nolte et al., 2011). According to Bowlby (1982), human beings are born with a psychobiological system, the attachment system, which motivates them to seek proximity to caregivers in times of distress to optimize their chances of survival. The infant-caregiver relationship is thought to serve as a template for future relationships and adult attachment theorists have demonstrated that romantic relationships in adulthood have several parallels to the infant-caregiver bond and serve the same function, i.e., to regulate emotions (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). Based on the interaction between infant and caregiver, the child develops an individual attachment style. Studies have shown that attachment styles established in childhood or adolescence stay relatively stable, and they form the basis of a person's adult attachment style (Fraley, 2002; Groh et al., 2014; Hazan and Shaver, 1990; Pascuzzo et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2000).

1.2. Attachment and the development of emotion regulation strategies

Early attachment interactions (i.e., seeking proximity to, and security from, a caregiver and the caregiver's reaction to this) influence the development of systematic attachment styles or inner working models. Inner working models include representations of the safety of the world, beliefs about one's own ability to cope in times of threat and distress, and strategies for regulating emotions (Shaver and Mikulincer, 2002). When a child seeks proximity to an attachment figure and experiences support and protection, a sense of *attachment security* is promoted and the bond will serve as an anxiety-buffering function (Bowlby, 1982; Nolte et al., 2011). Attachment security (*primary* attachment strategy) is marked by trust in others, comfort with closeness, and ability to deal with stressors and threats in constructive ways (Mikulincer et al., 2003). Inner working models allow securely attached individuals to maintain optimism and a sense of self-efficacy, even when the attachment figure is not available or social support is impossible (Sroufe and Waters, 1977). However, when a child does not experience consistent and reliable support and protection, she or he will develop defensive *secondary* attachment strategies namely deactivation of the attachment system (i.e., attachment avoidance) or hyperactivation of the attachment system (i.e., attachment anxiety). Both primary and secondary attachment strategies are means to obtain attachment-related goals (Bowlby, 1982; Shaver and Mikulincer, 2002). Part of this is achieved through particular emotion regulation strategies, and as such emotion regulation can be regarded as a component of the attachment strategies. However, emotion regulation also differs from attachment strategies, since emotion regulation is a broader concept, which is also relevant outside close relationships.

Deactivation or *attachment avoidance* may be the result of perceiving one's caregiver as unavailable. Deactivating strategies serve to protect the child from unwanted feelings such as pain or longing for distant and rejecting caregivers. Deactivating strategies involve down-regulating emotions (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2005) and diverting attention away from threats in order to reduce uncomfortable feelings of rejection from

others (Cassidy, 2000; Fuendeling, 1998). Close relationships can be distressing for individuals with an avoidant attachment style, and thus they tend to have difficulties with self-disclosure and with displaying warm feeling towards others (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2010). In contrast, hyperactivation or *attachment anxiety* may develop when the child perceives the caregiver as inconsistent and unpredictable. The child has an unfulfilled need to receive more attention from her/his caregivers and to obtain attention and engagement, negative emotions are exaggerated and intensified (Cassidy and Berlin, 1994; Mikulincer et al., 2003). Thus, in contrast to deactivation, sustaining negative emotions is viewed as congruent with attachment goals. Attachment anxiety is characterized by hyperactivation, which involves upregulation of emotions (Mikulincer et al., 2003). Furthermore, attachment anxiety is associated with overreaction to negative emotions, impulsive behavior (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2005), increased attention to distress and threats and with the perception of oneself as helpless and incompetent at regulating emotion and a tendency to overly depend on others (Fuendeling, 1998; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2005).

1.3. Attachment style and anxiety

Insecure attachment does not necessarily lead to psychopathology, but chronically relying on deactivating or hyperactivating strategies may increase the risk of developing mental disorders (Wei et al., 2005). Attachment theorists propose that attachment insecurity is a nonspecific risk factor for developing psychopathology (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2012). There are consistent findings showing a positive relationship between attachment anxiety and anxiety symptoms in both non-clinical and clinical samples (Eng et al., 2001; Manes et al., 2016; Marazziti et al., 2007; Mickelson et al., 1997; Rosenstein and Horowitz, 1996), whereas the findings for attachment avoidance are mixed. Specifically, several studies (e.g., Hankin et al., 2005; Wei et al., 2003; Wei et al., 2004; Williams and Riskind, 2004), have found significant positive relationships between attachment avoidance and anxiety symptoms in non-clinical samples while others have reported non-significant relationships (e.g., Onishi et al., 2001). The discrepancies may be due to differences in attachment measures, or due to the fact that the majority of studies have investigated the relationship in college samples providing a narrow range of scores, making potential relations hard to detect. Furthermore, some studies measure attachment style with the Adult Attachment Interview (Main and Goldwyn, 1985) and others with self-report measures. Roisman et al. (2007) suggest that the different measures may capture different facets of adult attachment and are not interchangeable. In addition, when measuring attachment style with self-report measures, it is important to control for the correlation between attachment anxiety and avoidance statistically (Cameron et al., 2012). However, the discrepancies may also be explained theoretically. A recent attachment model of anxiety disorders (Nolte et al., 2011) proposes that attachment anxiety represents a greater risk for developing an anxiety disorder than does attachment avoidance. In line with this, attachment anxiety (preoccupied style) is more strongly correlated with internalizing/affective disorders than attachment avoidance (dismissing style) (Bakermans-Kranenburg and IJzendoorn, 2009; Rosenstein and Horowitz, 1996).

In sum, there is empirical support for the association between attachment insecurity and anxiety symptoms. However, this conclusion is based on research that has primarily examined this relationship in non-clinical populations. In order to maximize clinical utility, research including clinical samples is warranted.

1.4. Anxiety and the regulatory function of adult attachment

Threatening situations and the experience of fear activate the attachment system (Mikulincer et al., 2003). Individuals with a secure attachment style tend to be willing to experience fear and threats (Dykas and Cassidy, 2011). They are more likely either to regulate their

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