



# Effects of attachment and rearing behavior on anxiety in normal developing youth: A mediational study <sup>☆</sup>



Sonja Breinholst <sup>\*</sup>, Barbara Hoff Esbjørn, Marie Louise Reinholdt-Dunne

Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen, 1353 Copenhagen K, Denmark

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 27 January 2014  
Received in revised form 13 August 2014  
Accepted 20 August 2014  
Available online 17 September 2014

### Keywords:

Attachment  
Rearing behavior  
Anxiety  
Childhood  
Parenting  
Mediation

## ABSTRACT

A few studies have examined the relative contribution of insecure attachment and negative parental rearing behaviors on childhood anxiety, but none have examined if insecure attachment mediates the association between negative parental rearing behavior and anxiety. The present study investigated the direct, as well as the indirect, relation between attachment to parents, parental rearing behaviors and anxiety symptoms in a sample of 1134 normal developing children and adolescent. Attachment relation was measured by the Security Scale (SEC), negative parental rearing behavior was measured by the Rearing Behavior Questionnaire (RBQ), and anxiety was assessed using the Screen for Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders-Revised (SCARED-R). We found, in accordance with previous research, that insecure attachment, maternal rejection and overprotection, each accounted for a significant proportion of the variance of anxiety symptoms. Another result was that insecure attachment was found to mediate the relationship between maternal psychological control and rejection, and anxiety symptoms. Findings are discussed with respect to future directions.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Anxiety disorders are among the most widespread and frequently occurring psychiatric disorders in childhood and adolescence (Albano, Chorpita, & Barlow, 2003; Kessler & Wang, 2008). Studies demonstrate that at any one time approximately 10% of all children and adolescents meet the diagnostic criteria for an anxiety disorder (Costello, Mustillo, Erkanli, Keeler, & Angold, 2003; Ford, Goodman, & Meltzer, 2003). Research has shown that persons who have a relatively stable proneness for anxiety, that is have a high trait anxiety, are more likely to suffer from anxiety disorders (Spielberger & Reheiser, 2009). Anxiety disorders have severe cognitive and social consequences for both the child and its family, as well as economic consequences for the society (Bodden, Dirksen, & Bögels, 2008). Although lower levels of anxiety may increase performance, high levels have been associated with decreased performance across the learning cycle (e.g. poorer study skills, worse test outcome; (Cassady, 2004; Man, Blahus, Spielberger, Guerrero, & Strelau, 1990).

The detrimental effects of anxiety call upon effective treatment programs if we are to enhance learning and social competence in

youth. However, further knowledge on the interrelations between mechanism underlying the development and maintenance of anxiety is required if we are to enhance treatment effect. Studies have therefore investigated the etiology of childhood anxiety, including parental rearing behaviors and attachment (Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006; Wood, Mcleod, Sigman, Hwang, & Chu, 2003), however, mediational and moderational analyses have yet to be conducted.

### 1.1. Parental rearing behavior

A theoretically emphasized risk factor for the development and maintenance of childhood anxiety is parental rearing behavior. For instance, high levels of negative parental rearing behaviors such as over-involvement and psychological control are suggested to lead to anxiety by interfering with the child's development of self-efficacy, that is, lack of perceived mastery and control, which may then lead to feelings of anxiety (Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006; Chorpita, 2001; Hudson & Rapee, 2001, 2002; Muris & Merckelbach, 1998; Wood et al., 2003). Another negative rearing behavior that has received attention is parental rejection, which is characterized by low levels of parental warmth, approval, and responsiveness in the interaction (Clark & Ladd, 2000; McLeod, Wood, & Weisz, 2007). Parental rejection is thought to influence the assumptions and expectations the child holds about itself (as less competent) and the surrounding world (as hostile and threatening) (Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006). In contrast, parental

<sup>☆</sup> This article is a Special issue article – “Young researcher award 2014”.

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen, Øster Farimagsgade 2A, 1353 Copenhagen K, Denmark. Tel.: +45 35324892; fax: +45 35324890.

E-mail address: [Sonja.Breinholst@psy.ku.dk](mailto:Sonja.Breinholst@psy.ku.dk) (S. Breinholst).

acceptance signals that parental assistance is available for the child whenever needed (Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006; Moore, Whaley, & Sigman, 2004).

In a review (Wood et al., 2003) and meta-analysis (McLeod et al., 2007), both parental rejection and psychological control were found to be related to anxiety. The effect was stronger for psychological control ( $d = 0.52$ ) than for rejection ( $d = 0.41$ ). The strongest association was found for one sub-dimension of control, namely autonomy granting ( $d = 0.93$ ). However, in contrast to the theoretical models mentioned above emphasizing negative parental rearing behaviors as an important contributing factors for anxiety, the meta-analysis reported a modest association between these and anxiety. Negative parental rearing behavior only accounted for 4% of the variance of child anxiety. These findings suggest that our understanding of the origins of childhood anxiety may require an identification of other risk factors, within the family and elsewhere. One such risk factor could be an insecure attachment style since empirical findings has previously found this to be associated with anxiety (Colnnesi et al., 2011).

### 1.2. Qualities of attachment

Secure attachment remains pivotal for a healthy development across lifespan (Bowlby, 1969). The first specific attachment relations are formed to the parents during the child's first year of life (Ainsworth, 1989), and parents are often found to be primary attachment figures until adolescence (Seibert & Kerns, 2009). Bowlby (1969) theorized that attachment figures of securely attached children are used as both a safe haven from which the children explore their surrounding world, and as a secure base to which they return in time of distress. Securely attached children perceive their caregiver as caring, responsive, and available. In contrast, when a caregiver is perceived either as unresponsive and unavailable or unpredictable, the child develops an avoidant or ambivalent attachment relationship, respectively. Avoidant attached children do not seek contact or comfort from their caregivers, whereas ambivalent attached children seek reassurance from their caregivers but do not seem to benefit from the interaction. Hence, insecure attachment leads to feelings of and behaviors associated with fear and anxiety (Bosquet & Egeland, 2006; Bowlby, 1958).

Empirical studies examining the relation between attachment quality and internalizing behaviors in youth have mostly been cross-sectional. In spite of mixed results, research provides evidence for an association between attachment insecurity and anxiety (Brumariu & Kerns, 2010; Colnnesi et al., 2011). Two longitudinal, prospective studies have also been conducted (the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care, NICHDSECC). The Minnesota study found that the early insecure attachment relationship predicted fear and anxiety in later adolescence (Warren, Huston, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997). This was supported by findings from the NICHDSECC study and a recent meta-analysis where perceived attachment insecurity in early childhood was moderately associated with elevated levels of anxiety symptoms in middle childhood (Colnnesi et al., 2011; Kerns, Siener, & Brumariu, 2011). Hence, further substantial support is found for the hypothesis that insecurely attached children have a greater risk for experiencing anxiety than securely attached children.

### 1.3. The relative contribution of attachment insecurity and negative parental rearing behaviors

Very few studies have examined the relative contribution of different attachment qualities and rearing behaviors to anxiety in childhood. One study assessed a non-clinical population (Muris,

Meesters, Merckelbach, & Hülsenbeck, 2000), while another examined a clinical sample (Brown & Whiteside, 2008). Both studies found insecure attachment and negative parental rearing behavior to be related to worry. However, neither of these studies examined anxiety symptoms or disorders but rather worry. Although worry is related to anxiety, the role of the relative contribution of attachment and parental rearing behavior in predicting the variance of anxiety symptoms still needs to be investigated. Furthermore, they assessed the quality of the attachment relationship towards friends, and did not provide information about the pattern of attachment to the primary caregiver(s). Thus, it remains unclear how specific attachment qualities (i.e., secure/insecure) to the mother and father correlate to rearing behavior, and how they are related to anxiety symptoms.

One study has in part addressed this issue by applying anxiety symptoms as the outcome variable, as well as including behavioral inhibition as an explanatory factor (van Brakel, Muris, Bögels, & Thomassen, 2006). Small to moderate correlations were found between attachment, rearing behavior and behavioral inhibition. Modest but significant positive correlations were found for all the mentioned factors and anxiety symptoms, with each factor accounting for a small but unique proportion of the variance of anxiety symptomatology. However, this study was also based on the child's attachment relationship with other children rather than assessing qualities of the attachment relationship with the parents (van Brakel et al., 2006). A different approach is found in the study by Roelofs, Meesters, Bamelis, and Muris (2006). They investigated the link between attachment style to parents and parental rearing behavior but not specifically to anxiety. Instead they examined broadband internalizing and externalizing problems in non-clinical children. The study assessed the attachment relationship to both mother and father. Perceived rearing behaviors for both parents accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in internalizing symptoms. Attachment, however, was found to play a less prominent role. The study investigated children aged 9–12 years, and firm conclusions regarding the generalizability to adolescents can therefore not be inferred.

Although insecure attachment and negative parental rearing behavior have been established as risk factors, knowledge about how these important mechanisms lead to anxiety – both directly and through indirect interactions is currently lacking. The research still needs to address if, for example, attachment may mediate the relation between parental rearing behaviors and anxiety. For instance a paradox exists, in that current studies involving parents in treatment, targeting negative parental rearing behaviors in general do not lead to improved treatment gains compared to individual child therapy (Manassis et al., 2014). Perhaps mediational factors need to be directly addressed in therapy for enhancing treatment outcomes. The aim of the present study was therefore to examine whether attachment mediated the relation between parental rearing behavior and anxiety. Our study expands previous studies by conducting mediational analyses of the interactions between the established risk factors; attachment, and parental rearing behavior in relation to anxiety symptoms. Furthermore, we assess DSM-IV based anxiety symptomatology, and assess attachment relationship to both mother and father, respectively. Our study also expands the previous literature by investigating a significantly larger sample of children and adolescents than the previously applied (Brown & Whiteside, 2008; Muris & Merckelbach, 1998; Muris, Mayer, & Meesters, 2000; Roelofs et al., 2006; van Brakel et al., 2006).

Our study assessed the following hypotheses (i) attachment insecurity and negative parental rearing behavior each account for a significant and unique proportion of the variance of anxiety symptoms, and (ii) attachment insecurity mediates the relation between negative parental behaviors and anxiety.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/890061>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/890061>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)