



Joint drawing interpersonal recall in insecurely attached couples



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ABSTRACT

This research investigated the Joint Drawing Interpersonal Recall, in order to gain further understanding of the subjective experiences of insecure couples. Sixty couples underwent the joint-drawing task, completed the Adult Attachment Questionnaire, and took part in a process recalling the joint interaction. Interviews of eight of the couples, in which the female was classified as anxious and the male as avoidant, were submitted for content analysis. Qualitative analysis suggested 5 different themes: 1. A wish for togetherness, 2. A wish for separateness, 3. Issues of control, 4. Gaps between partners reactions, and 5. Detachment during Joint Drawing Interpersonal Recall. Implications for art therapy and for the utilization of a couple-recall process for assessment and intervention with couples will be discussed.

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Introduction

In art therapy, the moments following the creative process are considered to be highly important for processing, observing and contemplating the creative product and its significance for the creator. Investigating these moments touches on the main essence of the art therapy process: the experience and meaning of the creative product and process for the creator-client (Snir & Regev, 2014). The current study focuses on the joint discussion that takes place subsequent to the creative process in insecure attached couples. The objective is to delineate the components of the experience of drawing together that are specific to insecurely attached couples. It thus aims to contribute to a better understanding of the evaluative potential of the joint drawing technique.

In the joint drawing procedure two participants work together on one shared page. There are several ways of instructing couples to draw together, but the most typical in therapeutic sessions is undirected, free joint drawing. This evaluation and intervention technique is used in family, couple and art therapies and is based on the premise that the task of working on one shared space brings out interpersonal themes and meaningful aspects of the participants' relational space (Snir & Hazut, 2012; Snir & Wiseman, 2010, 2013; Wadeson, 2010).

Joint drawing, as a "doing together" task in marital therapy, enables the therapist to witness the couple in an actual, real-time, shared task that highlights the interactional processes underlying the relationship which are concretized in the drawing (Wadeson, 2010). Themes of relatedness and individuality, such as boundaries, hierarchy, roles, and dependency, autonomy and balance of power (Landgarten, 2013), closeness, distance, similarities and differences, and communication patterns (Wadeson, 2010) can clearly be seen through behavioral and pictorial phenomena. These phenomena, which were identified by Hazot and Snir, include suggestions for cooperation versus non-cooperation, reactions to suggested cooperation/non-cooperation, relating to images made by the partner, distance between the partners in the drawing, contact between the marks of the two partners, occupation of areas, similarity versus difference between the drawing styles of the participants, connection versus separation between images, coherence of the resulting product,

symbolism of style, images in the drawing that are significant to understanding the relationship, behavior over the course of the drawing process, and transitions between the drawings (for details see Snir & Hazut, 2012).

One major segment of joint drawing as a psychotherapeutic intervention tool is the post-drawing observation, in which the creators and therapist recall and reflect upon the product together, in a process known as joint drawing interpersonal recall (JDIR). At this point in the therapy session, the therapist invites the couple to look at the drawing, and to recall how it unfolded; namely, who drew what, when each element was drawn, and how each of them felt about it. As the couple express their perceptions of their own actions and the actions of the other as they worked, the dynamics between the couple, each of their perceptions of the self, the other and their desires as regards the relationship become clarified and rise to consciousness (Snir & Regev, 2014).

One of the main theories used to interpret the interactions between couples during the creative process is Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, 1988), which has been central to empirically investigating close relationships throughout life, including couple relations (Feeney, 2002a, 2002b). Attachment Theory contends that the overall goal of the attachment system is to maintain felt security. Nevertheless, some people fail to achieve this goal.

Specifically, preoccupied individuals (high in attachment anxiety), based on their attachment history of insensitive or inconsistent caregiving, tend to hyper-activate the attachment system to attain proximity to the attachment figure. They tend to have simultaneous positive and negative views of the other (Mikulincer, Shaver, Bar-On, & Ein-Dor, 2010). Their ambivalent model of others, combined with a negative model of themselves and their own efforts to feel secure in the context of incessantly questioning the availability of the attachment figure, result in an overly dependent style. When they feel the attachment figure is not being responsive, they experience anxiety and respond with high levels of attachment behaviors (e.g. clinging) in an attempt to have their need for support met (Bartholomew, Henderson, & Dutton, 2001). Their excessive need for love and approval causes them to focus on relationships and on negative emotions and thoughts (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Their rejection-oriented attentional focus keeps them vigilantly looking for signs of disapproval in interpersonal interactions (Collins and Read, 1990).

By contrast, avoidant individuals (high in attachment avoidance) based on an attachment history of parental rejection, protect themselves against the anxiety aroused by rejection by deactivating the attachment system (Kobak & Sceery,

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1988). They deal with the absence of a secure base and the need to avoid rejection by employing strategies of cognitive or behavioral distancing from the source of distress. For example, they may divert their attention or inhibit deep encoding of information that might activate the attachment system. These strategies help avoidant individuals avoid attachment-related emotions from the outset. They repress other thoughts and feelings that might activate the system, and dissociate emotional memories from other memories, thereby keeping the attachment system relatively inactive (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988).

The impact of internal working models within relations is affected not only by representations of early relations, but also, and no less importantly, by the reactions of each partner to the other (e.g. Alexandrov, Cowan, & Cowan, 2005; Davila & Kashy, 2009). While a partner with a positive internal working model of attachment may quiet a person with insecure attachments, the combination of two partners with insecure attachments may preserve anxious attachment. Empirical and clinical reports suggest that in couples where one partner is avoidant and the other is anxious, one member's pattern of relating can even heighten the other's use of defense mechanisms (Bond & Bond, 2004; Feeney, 2002b). The reason is that the intense need for closeness and reassurance prevalent among individuals high in attachment-related anxiety threatens the difficulty with closeness and dependency among individuals high in attachment-related avoidance and makes it hard for them to create a healthy and satisfying balance between intimacy and individuality in their relationships. As a result, anxious hyper-activation and avoidant deactivation increase.

In an earlier study with the same sample using the Session Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ, Stiles, Gordon, & Lani, 2002), we examined the associations between the participants' attachment patterns and their perceptions and emotions with regards to joint drawing sessions (Snir & Wiseman, 2010). The findings showed that women perceived the joint interaction as deeper and reported feeling more aroused than men, and that this gender difference was more pronounced in insecure couples, in which most of the females were anxious and most of the males were avoidant. These findings provide evidence for the cycle of escalation that characterizes avoidant-anxious couples, in which one of the partner's defensive behavior exaggerates the other's defenses in a circular manner (Feeney, 2002a, 2002b; Snir & Wiseman, 2010).

Based on these findings, the current study focused on JDIR to better understand the subjective experiences of insecure couples in a joint drawing session, as perceived and expressed by each member (avoidant males and anxious females) through a qualitative analysis of post-session interviews.

Method

Participants

Participants were 8 insecure heterosexual couples (8 men and 8 women) who were either married or romantically involved and had lived together for six months or more. These couples were selected from a larger sample and classified so that the female exhibited anxious attachment and the male presented with avoidant attachment (2 dismissing and 6 fearful) on the basis of the ECRS (see tools).

In the larger sample the participants' ages ranged from 19 to 36 years ($M = 26.61$, $SD = 3.19$), and the relationship duration ranged from 10 months to 12.5 years ($M = 45.01$, $SD = 30.42$, in months). At least one partner in most of the couples was a university undergraduate or graduate student (see procedure section). Years of education ranged from 10 to 20 ($M = 14.8$, $SD = 2.28$).

Measures

Adult romantic attachment (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998)

The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECRS) was used to assess adult romantic attachment dimensions. This is a self-report, multi-item measure of attachment based on factor analysis of 14 different self-report attachment measures. The 36-item scale consists of two 18-item subscales: anxiety and avoidance. The anxiety scale assesses fear of being abandoned or rejected. The avoidance scale assesses discomfort with intimacy and emotional closeness. The ECRS employs a 7-point Likert-type response format. High subscale reliabilities have been reported for anxiety and avoidance, .91 and .94, respectively (Brennan et al., 1998). The anxiety scale correlates highly with scales measuring anxiety and preoccupation with attachment, jealousy and fear of rejection; the avoidance scale correlates highly with scales measuring avoidance

and discomfort with closeness (Brennan et al., 1998). Evidence of validity has been widely established (see Brennan et al., 1998; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). In the current study the Cronbach's alphas for the anxiety and the avoidance scales were .86 and .83, respectively. In addition to yielding the two dimensions of attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance, the ECRS enables a classification into the four attachment groups: secure (low anxiety–low avoidance), preoccupied (high anxiety–low avoidance), dismissing (low anxiety–high avoidance), and fearful (high anxiety–high avoidance). In the present study based on attachment classification combinations of the couples (both secure, female secure–male insecure, female insecure–male secure, both insecure), the focus is on couples in which the female was classified as having anxious attachments and the male as having avoidant attachments (2 dismissing and 6 fearful). The ECRS was only used in the current study to select the insecure couples.

Semi-structured interview: joint observation and recall of the interpersonal process

The semi-structured interview was conducted while the couple and the researcher jointly observed the drawings made during the research session, and included the reconstruction of the interpersonal process. The researcher asked the participants to describe the drawing process, the phenomenological characteristics and then asked them whether the interactions that took place during the drawing process were familiar to them from their relationship in general. This interview method is customary in art therapy and was originally designed to raise the client's awareness of the experiences and the content expressed in the creative work (Betensky, 1995). The interview procedure was based on Interpersonal Process Recall, IPR (Kagan, 1969, 1975) which is frequently used in psychiatric research (Wiseman, 1992).

Procedure

Couples in the larger sample were recruited through advertisements inviting couples to participate in a study investigating male–female interpersonal relationships. The candidates were told during an initial phone conversation that participation included a simple drawing task, though no previous knowledge of drawing was required; they were not told ahead of time that it would be a joint drawing task. Couples signed an informed consent form. The sessions took place at the couples' homes, and each couple was paid about US \$20 for participating.

Joint drawing session

After receiving a short explanation of the procedure, first as a warm-up, each partner was given a box of 24 oil pastels and a blank sheet of white paper, size A4, and was asked to make an individual, non-directed, freehand drawing. Then, the two were given the following instructions for the joint drawing task: "Here is one sheet of paper for both of you. Draw whatever you like on it, but do not talk to each other." The participants worked on a 100 cm × 70 cm blank sheet of white paper taped to a wall. This task was given twice and was limited each time to five minutes. After drawing, each participant sat in a separate location and completed the questionnaires. They then took part in a JDIR.

Data analysis

Grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006) was used to analyze the transcriptions of the JDIR for the eight insecure couples. The analysis dealt with themes of relations and the couple's interpretation of the pictorial phenomena in their work in relation to (1) the couple's description of their feelings and perceptions regarding what occurred during the joint creative process; (2) the responses

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