



Maternal availability and adolescent dependency as moderators on the relation between personality and ER strategies in a Turkish sample



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ABSTRACT

The current study examined moderator roles of two dimensions of attachment quality (maternal availability and child dependency on mothers) in the relationship between personality traits (neuroticism and extraversion) and emotion regulation (ER) strategies (cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression). Differential effects of child dependency on mothers and maternal availability were expected on personality and ER strategies link. Participants were 267 first-year high school students from high schools located in Ankara, Turkey. Mean age of the adolescent sample was 15.00 ($SD = 0.39$). Adolescents were administered scales assessing ER strategies, attachment quality, and personality traits. Results revealed that high extraversion was associated with increased cognitive reappraisal for adolescents who reported high dependency on mothers, but it was unrelated to cognitive reappraisal for adolescents who reported low dependency. On the other hand, high neuroticism was associated with increased expressive suppression for adolescents who reported low maternal availability in times of stress, but it was unrelated to expressive suppression for adolescents who reported high maternal availability. This study was the first to document that maternal availability and child dependency on mothers differentially moderate the association between ER strategies and personality traits. Findings will be discussed in line with socialization and cultural context.

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1. Introduction

Emotion regulation (ER) is widely defined as the abilities to monitor, evaluate, and modulate emotional reactions flexibly in order to meet individual goals (John & Gross, 2004). A large portion of the studies conducted on the development of emotion regulation (ER) capacities have focused on infancy and early childhood (Eisenberg, Champion, & Ma, 2004), a critical period for the development of the foundations of ER processes (John & Gross, 2004). However, there is evidence indicating that ER capacities continue to develop in adolescence, as a result of gaining life experience and utilization of various ER strategies depending on the circumstances (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007). Cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression are two most commonly used ER strategies in which the former refers to the reinterpretation of emotion eliciting events so as to lessen the emotional impact and the latter refers to inhibition of the emotional expression (Gross & John, 2003). These two strategies are the focus of the current study.

During adolescence, due to the changes taking place in parent-child relationship, the time spent with parents is reduced, and the

adolescents may start seeking less coaching and guidance from their parents in order to regulate their emotions (Kuhn & Laird, 2011), but they still need their parents to be available, sensitive, and responsive in times of stress (Ainsworth, 1989). Research indicates that when parents fail to meet their needs properly, adolescents' sense of security is impaired, thus their ER capacities are affected negatively (Morris et al., 2007). However, research findings are mostly based on data collected from Western adolescents, and there is limited evidence from non-western societies. Therefore, the link between attachment quality and emotion regulation of Turkish adolescents is the focus of the current study. Although the quality of mother-adolescent interaction plays a major role in the development of ER strategies, the impact of personality traits should not be neglected because of their relationship with the way individuals experience emotions (in terms of both diversity and intensity) (John & Gross, 2004), thus, making the ER process more complicated (Calkins & Johnson, 1998).

1.1. Attachment quality and emotion regulation

Available research suggests that the course of the attachment relationship between the child and the parent starts to change as the child moves into adolescence (Lieberman, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 1999). Kerns, Tomich, Aspelmeier, and Contreras (2000) focused on the

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normative development of the attachment relationship during middle childhood. Lieberman et al. (1999) highlighted the importance of two dimensions: availability and dependency critical for investigation of attachment in middle childhood and early adolescence, based on the conceptualization of attachment security by Kerns et al. (2000).

Availability is a perception regarding the parents' way of approaching and responsiveness to the children when they feel distressed. Securely attached children perceive themselves as worthy and lovable, besides holding a belief that the significant others will provide a safe environment as well as appropriate help and emotional support when needed. Therefore, these children perceive distressing events as less threatening, and these events are thus less likely to trigger a physiological stress response (Cassidy, 2000). On the other hand, insecure children may hold a perception of themselves as unworthy, besides an expectation of unresponsiveness and hostility from significant others (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Spangler and Schieche (1998) suggest that insecure attachment patterns are associated with increased levels of cortisol secretions when distressed (like stranger situation paradigm) and a tendency to experience negative emotions in a more intense manner. Thus, these children have difficulties in expressing negative emotions in appropriate or controlled ways (Morris et al., 2007) and learn to minimize or suppress their signaling of distress (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008).

On the other hand, dependency refers to the child's need for being close to the attachment figure, in addition to an inclination to seek for parents' help more often. A glance at the literature indicates that as the child grows older and approaches adolescence, dependency becomes less essential in accordance with a tendency to perceive self as "less needy of help" (Kerns, Tomich, & Kim, 2006; Lieberman et al., 1999). Nearly all of the studies indicating the importance of dependency are based on data collected from Western adolescents, and there is limited evidence from non-western societies, where the parent-adolescent relationship is defined based on different terms (Kagitcibasi, 2013). In non-western societies including Turkey, the self is defined in terms of interdependence and families have a tendency to foster dependency in their children (Okman-Fisek, 1982). Further, non-western individuals show a tendency to rely on social support more frequently to deal with negative situations (Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008) and the utilization of the family members as ER agent may extend into adolescence (Şimşek & Demir, 2014). Thus, the support provided by parents, in particular by mothers, is normal in a typical Turkish family (Sen, Yavuz-Muren, & Yagmurcu, 2014). When these characteristics of the Turkish family are considered, there is good reason to expect that dependency on mothers might be related to the acquisition of effective ER strategies during adolescence.

1.2. Personality and emotion regulation

Of particular relevance to the current study, temperamental traits of negative and positive emotionality as developmentally stable, higher-order temperamental factors are especially relevant to ER (Yap, Allen, & Sheeber, 2007). Research suggests a clear conceptual overlap between temperament and personality traits in which the former is used to indicate individual differences among infants and children whereas the latter is used for adolescents and adults (Farrell, Brook, Dane, Marini, & Volk, 2015; Shiner & DeYoung, 2013). Accordingly, negative emotionality which refers to general distress, fear and irritability experienced after facing stressful situations (Putnam, Sanson, & Rothbart, 2002) has strong association with neuroticism (Rothbart, Ahadi, & Evans, 2000; Shiner & DeYoung, 2013). On the other hand, positive emotionality which refers to the characteristics such as being energetic, excitement seeking, and having pleasurable contact with the environment is a strong predictor of extraversion in adolescence and adulthood (Grist & McCord, 2010; Yap et al., 2007).

Higher degrees of neuroticism is associated with more intense emotions and a tendency to be overwhelmed by these emotions, thus a

failure in generating constructive regulating behaviors (Calkins & Johnson, 1998) and eventually difficulties in the ER process (Jaffe, Gullone, & Hughes, 2010). High affective intensity inclines neurotic children and adolescents for pursuing methods that allow them to get rid of the negative emotions as soon as possible (Gresham & Gullone, 2012; Jaffe et al., 2010). So, neuroticism is responsible for the predisposition towards methods such as expressive suppression, and, thereby, to be less successful at improving mood and more likely to experience and express negative emotions (Gresham & Gullone, 2012). On the contrary, extraversion has a positive association with cognitive reappraisal dimensions of emotion regulation (Gresham & Gullone, 2012; Jaffe et al., 2010), which operates through reinterpretation of stressful events and active efforts to downregulate negative mood states. Individuals with these ER skills have closer social relationships, higher self-esteem and life satisfaction (Gross & John, 2003). According to Wang, Shi, and Li (2009) the difference between these two traits is due to extraverts' tendency to experience lower levels of negative emotions. This trend leaves time and space for utilization of cognitive reappraisal (Jaffe et al., 2010).

1.3. The present study

In addition to considering the separate effects of attachment quality and adolescents' personality traits on ER strategies, it is necessary to examine the interaction of these two factors.

Considerable evidence indicates that the relation between temperament and parenting is bi-directional and complex (Putnam et al., 2002). That is, children's temperamental characteristics may influence parenting practices, and same parenting behaviors may elicit different reactions for children with different temperamental characteristics (Kochanska, Aksan, & Joy, 2007; Yap et al., 2007). Most of the studies examining this link between temperament and parenting have primarily focused on infancy and early childhood (e.g. Yagmurcu & Altan, 2010) and examined emotion socialization practices of parents rather than attachment quality (Klimes-Dougan & Zeman, 2007). Only a limited number of studies have examined the joint effects of perceived parenting behaviors and temperamental dispositions in late childhood (e.g. Gresham & Gullone, 2012; Jaffe et al., 2010). In a study of 9–12 year old children, Jaffe et al. (2010) found that high temperamental approach behavior was negatively related to expressive suppression when parental care was also high.

To our knowledge, the role of personality traits (i.e., neuroticism and extraversion) and attachment quality (i.e., dependency and availability) interaction on the development of adolescents' ER strategies has not been examined yet. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to investigate how different dimensions of attachment quality and personality traits interact with one another in predicting two ER strategies of Turkish adolescents. Given the associations explained above it was hypothesized that mothers' lack of availability moderates the relation between neuroticism and suppression. It was also hypothesized that dependency on mothers moderates the relation between extraversion and cognitive reappraisal.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 267 Turkish adolescents in the first grades of high schools located in Ankara, the capital of Turkey. The mean age of the adolescents was 15.00 years ($SD = 0.39$) ranging from 14 to 16 years. Of these, 146 were females (54.7%) and 121 were males (45.3%). The sample includes adolescents coming from middle SES which is determined through education levels of the parents and monthly family income. Based on the adolescent reports, 61% of the families had two children and the fathers had higher educational level than the mothers. Of the total sample, 24.7% had mothers with primary school education, 33.5% had mothers with high school education, and 40.8% had mothers with

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