



Are children's own interpretations of ambiguous situations based on how they perceive their mothers have interpreted ambiguous situations for them in the past?

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ABSTRACT

The intergenerational transmission of anxious cognitions and behaviors may be a possible mechanism underlying concordance between maternal and child anxieties. By disambiguating ambiguous situations for their child in a threatening manner, anxious mothers may 'train' their children towards a general tendency to also interpret ambiguity in a threatening way. Ninety-two children and their mothers completed trait anxiety measures. Children completed two ambiguous scenario questionnaires, to measure their own interpretations of ambiguous situations (ASQ-C) and to measure their expectations of their mother's interpretation and behavior in response to ambiguous situations involving them (ASQ-EM). Maternal and child anxiety were significantly correlated. Children who made threat interpretations also anticipated that their mother would disambiguate situations for them in a threatening way. The relationship between maternal anxiety and child threat cognitions was mediated by children's expectations of how their mother would disambiguate situations for them when taken together with children's trait anxiety. The present findings provide preliminary support for the suggestion that children of anxious mothers may learn to interpret and respond to ambiguous situations based on how their mothers have interpreted ambiguous situations for them in the past.

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1. Introduction

Anxiety is the most common psychological disorder affecting both children and adults, and with 12% of the adult population experiencing significant anxiety symptoms in any year (Wittchen & Jacobi, 2005), it is highly likely that many children are raised by anxious parents. It is in fact widely documented that anxiety runs in families (Turner, Beidel, & Costello, 1987). Last, Hersen, Kazdin, Francis, and Grubb (1987) observed a greater than double the rate of current and lifetime anxiety disorders in mothers of anxious children compared to mothers of control children, with a subsequent study (Last, Hersen, Kazdin, Orvaschel, & Perrin, 1991) finding the lifetime rate of anxiety disorder in relatives of children with anxiety disorders and control children to be 40.4% and 18.5% respectively. In a recent study, Cooper, Fearn, Willett, Seabrook, and Parkinson (2006) found an elevated risk of current and lifetime maternal anxiety disorders and an elevated risk of paternal lifetime anxiety disorders in children with anxiety disorders compared to control group children.

Numerous studies have begun to examine ways in which parental but predominantly maternal characteristics may protect against or promote the development of anxiety in children. A significant proportion of unique variance in child anxiety can be explained by environmental influences (Eley et al., 2003) and it is plausible that characteristics of fear may be transmitted environmentally from parent to child. In particular, transmission of anxious behaviors and cognitions from parent to child may explain a significant proportion of the concordance between parental and child anxiety (Creswell & O'Connor, 2006; Creswell, O'Connor, & Brewin, 2006). In the present study, we focus on mothers and children and begin to examine the role of maternal behaviors and cognitions on the development of children's anxiety and anxiety-related cognitions.

Anxiety is associated with a range of cognitive biases affecting attention, memory, interpretation, and reasoning (Harvey, Watkins, Mansell, & Shafran, 2004). High trait anxious and anxiety disordered individuals disproportionately impose threatening interpretations upon ambiguous cues. There is also a substantial literature attesting to the presence of similar threat interpretation biases in childhood anxiety (Hadwin, Garner, & Perez-Olivas, 2006; Muris & Field, 2008). Childhood anxiety is associated with a bias towards drawing negative interpretations of ambiguous situations (Barrett, Rapee, Dadds, & Ryan, 1996; Bögels & Zigterman, 2000;

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Creswell & O'Connor, 2006), selecting the threat interpretation of ambiguous homophones (Hadwin, Frost, French, & Richards, 1997; Taghavi, Moradi, Neshat-Doost, Yule, & Dalgleish, 2000) and being faster and requiring less information to conclude that ambiguous vignettes will have a threatening conclusion (Muris, Merckelbach, & Damsma, 2000).

Parental and child interpretive biases have also been shown to be correlated. Schneider, Unnewehr, Florin, and Margraf (2002) reported that compared to children of parents with no anxiety disorder, children of parents with panic disorder demonstrated a greater bias towards threatening interpretations. Gifford, Reynolds, Bell, and Wilson (2008) observed that anxious children had mothers who made more threat interpretations and that children of anxious mothers also made more threat interpretations. Mothers and children also display similar threat cognitions about ambiguous situations, with mother's expectations about how their child would interpret these ambiguous situations appearing to partially mediate the association between mother and child threat cognitions (Creswell & O'Connor, 2006). One possibility is that mothers who demonstrate a self-referent threatening interpretation bias also expect their children to make threatening interpretations and this in turn may influence how their children themselves interpret events in their lives. Previous research has suggested that anxious mothers' also interpret ambiguous situations involving their child in a threatening way, expecting their children to make threatening interpretations of ambiguous but potentially threatening situations (Creswell & O'Connor, 2006; Creswell et al., 2006), expecting their child to respond to threat provoking situations with avoidant solutions (Barrett et al., 1996; Cobham, Dadds, & Spence, 1999) and holding more negative expectations for their children's future performance (Kortlander, Kendall, & Chansky, 1991).

Despite evidence that children demonstrate similar interpretive biases to adults, there has been a poverty of research investigating the genesis of these biases in children. While no causal mechanism has yet been established, we suggest that the transmission of anxious cognitions and behaviors from parent to child may make a significant and important contribution to the development of cognitive biases during childhood. There is some evidence that children's interpretation bias can be mediated by parental responses and discussion. For example, Barrett et al. (1996) observed that anxious children's interpretations of ambiguous situations became more threatening and their responses more avoidant after discussing the situations with their parents. Moreover, Chorpita, Albano, and Barlow (1995) reported a positive correlation between the number of anxious responses given by parents during a discussion with their child about a series of ambiguous situations and the change in children's action plans and threat interpretations subsequently, with children becoming significantly more avoidant and making more threat interpretations (although this latter effect was non-significant). Bögels, van Dongen, and Muris (2003) asked parents to indicate what children in general (not their own child) would think or do in a series of ambiguous situations. Children's initial threat interpretations of similar ambiguous situations were significantly associated with their mother's expectation that children in general would interpret ambiguous situations in a negative way. Bögels et al. (2003) suggest that this finding tentatively indicates that children may adopt their parents' interpretations concerning possible threat.

Field and Lester (in press) propose that such transmission of anxiety-related cognitive biases and associated behaviors between parents and children may act in an analogous fashion to experimental bias modification procedures (for a review see Mathews & MacLeod, 2002), in which a bias is 'trained' either towards or away from threatening interpretations. Using simple feedback-learning paradigms where participants are consistently

forced to select the threat or non-threat interpretation of a series of emotionally ambiguous stimuli, these procedures have proven to be capable of inducing interpretation biases in both adults and children, which simulate anxiety-linked interpretation biases and have produced evidence suggesting that biased interpretive processing is causally implicated in anxiety vulnerability (Hoppitt, Mathews, Yiend, & Mackintosh, in press; Mackintosh, Mathews, Yiend, Ridgeway, & Cook, 2006; Mathews & Mackintosh, 2000; Muris, Huijding, Mayer, & Hameetman, 2008; Muris, Huijding, Mayer, Remmerswaal, & Vreden, 2009; Murphy, Hirsch, Mathews, Smith, & Clark, 2007; Wilson, MacLeod, Mathews, & Rutherford, 2006).

Children are likely to encounter an ongoing stream of novel and often ambiguous stimuli during their childhood and one strategy by which to resolve that ambiguity and to learn appropriate emotional and behavioral responses to novel stimuli may be through parental guidance. A parent could act to resolve that ambiguity for their child in a relatively benign manner or in a more threatening manner, thus exposing their child to an array of anxiogenic learning experiences (Field & Lester, in press). In this way, each ambiguous experience the child encounters is equivalent to a trial in a bias modification procedure: the child is faced with an ambiguous situation and the parent offers (i.e. reinforces) either a threat interpretation or draws the child's attention to some threatening aspect of the situation, perhaps through verbal information (Field, Lawson, & Banerjee, 2008), vicarious learning experiences, such as fearful facial expressions (Askew & Field, 2007; Gerull & Rapee, 2002), gestures such as pointing, or other subtle behavioral reactions (Murray, Cooper, Creswell, Schofield, & Sack, 2007). If, extended over multiple learning experiences, anxious parents consistently resolve ambiguous experiences for their child in a threatening manner (similar to a bias modification procedure designed to induce a bias towards threatening interpretations) then this may increase the likelihood of the child acquiring a similar propensity towards making threatening interpretations of ambiguous stimuli.

If anxious parents do act to 'train' their children to interpret ambiguity in a threatening way then Field and Lester (in press) suggest that several assumptions need to be met. One such assumption is that parent and child threat-related interpretations correlate and as we have already outlined there is good evidence to suggest this is the case (Creswell & O'Connor, 2006; Creswell et al., 2006; Schneider et al., 2002). A second assumption is that anxious parents' interpretation biases towards threat must also extend to influence how they process aspects of their child's world as they will then be more likely to evoke threat interpretations of ambiguous situations that their child experiences. If anxious parent's cognitive biases did not extend into their child's environment, then it is unlikely that they would selectively evoke threat interpretations of ambiguous situations involving their child and as such the opportunity for children to learn anxiety-related cognitive and behavioral responses to ambiguity from their parents may be more limited. Lester, Field, Oliver, and Cartwright-Hatton (2009) demonstrated that anxious parents not only held threat interpretation biases about situations involving themselves but they also interpreted ambiguous situations involving their children in a similar threatening way.

For the parental 'training' hypothesis to be feasible it is also necessary to demonstrate empirically that when their child is faced with an ambiguous situation, anxious parents do actually disambiguate the situation for them in a more threatening way than a low anxious parent. In the present study, we begin to examine this by presenting children with several ambiguous situations and asking them how they think their mother would react in each situation, as a measure of the child's past experiences of ambiguity with their mother. If, as we propose, children's

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