Effect of Maternal Borderline Personality Disorder on Romantic Attachment in Adolescents

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Abstract

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) is a severe and chronic disorder that has been described as a disorder of attachment. The current study examines the romantic attachment orientations of mothers with BPD and their offspring. Mothers with BPD and their adolescents aged 14-17, n = 25, were compared with a normative sample, n = 22 on a measure of romantic attachment. In addition, the relationship between romantic attachment and BPD features (affect instability, identity problems, negative relationships, and self-harm) was assessed. Mothers with BPD were more preoccupied and fearful, and their adolescents were significantly more preoccupied in their romantic attachments than were comparisons. Maternal preoccupied ratings correlated positively with adolescent preoccupied ratings. Maternal fearful and preoccupied attachment correlated positively with all BPD features. Adolescent preoccupied and fearful ratings correlated significantly with adolescent affective instability, identity problems and self harm. Findings are discussed in terms of the intergenerational transmission of romantic attachment orientations and of BPD.

Introduction

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)

- BPD is a severe and chronic disorder characterized by self injurious/suicidal behavior, fear of abandonment, impulsivity, affective instability, inappropriate outbursts of anger, and intense and unstable relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).
- BPD’s core psychopathology is apparent in the context of interpersonal relations, and has been theorized to stem from insecure attachments in early childhood (Fonagy, Target, & Gergely, 2000; Agrawal, Gunderson, Holmes, & Lyons-Ruth, 2004).
- A recent study finds 5.9% of the population have BPD (Grant, et al., 2008)
- 20% of psychiatric inpatients and 50% of outpatients are diagnosed with BPD. 8-10% of individuals with BPD commit suicide (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Paris, 1993; Stone, 1990).

Developmental Psychopathology

- Studies of child development in children at high risk of developing a disorder may inform the etiology of the disorder (Sroufe & Rutter, 1984).
- Offspring of mothers suffering from BPD comprise a high risk group for developing BPD themselves due to genetic and environmental risk factors such as disruption in family
relationships, early interpersonal trauma/abuse, and intrusive parenting (Loranger, Oldham, & Tulis, 1982; Torgersen, et al., 2000).

- Interestingly, difficulties related to BPD are similar to developmental tasks in early childhood that are reworked in adolescence: attachment, self development, and self-regulation (Macfie, 2009; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005).
- Study of child development in a high risk group may inform preventive interventions and provide insight into the etiology of this disorder (Cicchetti & Hinshaw, 2003; Cicchetti & Toth, 1992)

Romantic Attachment

- Attachment theory suggests that parent-child attachment has lifelong effects, including influencing the quality of adult romantic relationships (Bowlby, 1973).
- Romantic attachment research focuses on attitudes toward current relationships with romantic partners (Hazan & Zeifman, 2008). Romantic attachment styles are classifications based on conscious perceptions of one’s attachment (Riggs et al., 2007).
- Adult romantic attachment differs from parent-child attachment in several ways, including reciprocity of attachment, shared caregiving roles, and sexual mating (Hazan & Zeifman, 2008).

Terminology

- Romantic attachment classifications are taken directly from the classifications used in the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), but are measured by self-report (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).
- Although theoretically related, adult romantic attachment styles are distinct from the concepts measured in the strange situation and the AAI.
- However, there is good concordance between the AAI and the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ) on secure and preoccupied attachment classifications (Crowell, Treboux, & Walters, 1999).

Romantic Attachment & BPD

- Individuals with BPD have been found to be more preoccupied and fearful in their romantic attachments (Agrawal, Gunderson, Holmes, & Lyons-Ruth, 2004).
- Preoccupied romantic attachment has been associated with a myriad of poor adjustment outcomes, including high ratings of negative affect, poor self-concept, inappropriate disclosure, and in adolescence, other at risk behaviors, such as low academic achievement, delinquency, at-risk sexual behavior, and increased substance use (Cooper, P. R., Shaver, & Collins, 1998a).
- Fearful attachment has been associated with high anxiety and avoidance towards close relationships, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, dissociation, and self defeating traits, as well as a wide range of psychiatric disturbances—paranoid, schizoid, schizotypal, avoidant, borderline, narcissistic, and obsessive compulsive personality traits (Anderson & Alexander, 1996; Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Brennan & Shaver, 1998; Brennan, Shaver, & Tobey, 1991). Fearful attachment has also been associated with a history of physical and sexual abuse (Riggs, et al., 2007).
Furthermore, attachment more generally may play an important role in mediating transmission of psychopathology across generations (Cummings & Cicchetti, 1990).

Since romantic attachment manifests in interpersonal relations and individuals with BPD display problems in their relationships, a study of romantic attachment in adolescent offspring of women with BPD may shed light on the development of BPD.

**Romantic Attachment in Adolescence**

- During adolescence, the structural organization of attachment figures is reorganized as they increasingly direct their attachment behaviors and concerns toward close friends rather than parents (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Hazan & Zeifman, 1994).
- The transformation of early attachment relationships and the formation of romantic relationships are key tasks in adolescence, and the disturbance of that process can have lasting consequences on intimacy, identity, self-regulation, and managing risky behavior, such as sex and substance use (Sroufe, et al., 2005).
- Lack of romantic attachment security may leave an adolescent vulnerable to psychopathology by impairing his or her ability to participate in satisfying relationships and appropriately understand and participate in social interactions (Kobak et al., 1991).
- Indeed, in adolescence romantic attachment insecurity has been associated with depression and externalizing behaviors (Kobak et al., 1991).
- Because romantic attachment has strong associations with adolescent development and the manifestation of BPD features, a better understanding of it could provide a unique perspective on its etiology.

**Gaps in Research**

- Despite the developmental importance of romantic attachment to adolescent development, there is still not a lot known about romantic attachment and the development of psychopathology. Because of the strong associations of BPD with preoccupied and fearful attachment (Agrawal, et al., 2004), the current study focuses specifically on styles of romantic attachment in adolescent offspring of women with BPD.
- Parent-child attachment has been shown to have a high degree of intergenerational transmission from the AAI and Strange Situation (Fonagy, Steele, & Steele, 1991; van IJzendoorn, 1995); however, no research to date has assessed similarities of romantic attachment in mother-adolescent dyads.
- Moreover, there is no research to date focusing solely on adolescents whose mothers have BPD (Macfie, in press). Indeed, there are only seven studies in all.

**Current Study**

- The current study assesses romantic attachment in mother-adolescent dyads with maternal BPD and its association with BPD features.

**Hypotheses**

1. Mothers with BPD and their adolescents would rate themselves in terms of romantic attachment as more fearful and more preoccupied than would normative comparisons
2. Mothers’ fearful and preoccupied romantic attachment would correlate significantly with their adolescents’ fearful and preoccupied romantic attachment.
3. Fearful and preoccupied romantic attachment ratings would be significantly correlated with BPD features in both mothers and adolescents.

Method

Participants
- N = 47 adolescents, average age 15 years 6 months, SD = 1 year 2 months
- n = 25 adolescents and their mothers with BPD, n=22 normative mother-adolescent dyads.
- Groups were matched on maternal educational and occupational status, adolescent age, race, and gender.
- Groups were not matched on income. However, income did not correlate with any of the dependant variables, so it was not necessary to control for it. See Table 1 for details.
- Mothers with BPD were recruited from outpatient clinics, referred by their clinicians, and from posters placed in the community
- Mothers without BPD were recruited from Boys and Girls Clubs, schools, and posters placed in the community.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Whole sample</th>
<th>BPD n=25</th>
<th>Comparisons n=22</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent age in years</td>
<td>15.68 (1.23)</td>
<td>15.37 (1.12)</td>
<td>16.05 (1.28)</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family yearly income</td>
<td>26,559 (18,294)</td>
<td>22,568 (12,970)</td>
<td>31,094 (22,367)</td>
<td>1.98*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollingshead Education &amp; Occupation Index</td>
<td>33.92 (13.44)</td>
<td>33.10 (15.65)</td>
<td>34.86 (10.68)</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Whole sample</th>
<th>BPD n=25</th>
<th>Comparisons n=22</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother single</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (girls)</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>3.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05

Procedure & Measures

BPD diagnosis
- SCID-II (First, Gibbon, Spitzer, Williams, & Benjamin, 1997). A structured interview was conducted after initial participant screening for all participants to assess BPD status (Yes / No).

BPD Features
- Personality Assessment Inventory (Morey, 1991). Participants rated themselves on features corresponding to borderline personality disorder (PAI-BOR scale).
o BPD features include: affective instability, identity problems, negative relationships, & self harm

**Romantic Attachment**

- **Relationship Questionnaire** (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Participants are asked to numerically rate their own similarity to each attachment orientation as a score of 0 - 7 for each attachment style.
  - **Fearful**: I am somewhat uncomfortable getting close to others. I want emotionally close relationships, but I find it difficult or to depend on them. I sometimes worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to others.
  - **Preoccupied**: I want to be completely emotionally intimate with others, but I often find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I am uncomfortable being without close relationships, but I sometimes worry that others don't value me as much as I value them.

**Results**

- **Hypothesis 1**
  - As hypothesized, mothers with BPD were significantly more fearful, \( t(45) = 4.41, p < .001 \), and more preoccupied, \( t(44) = 3.19, p < .01 \) than were comparisons.
  - As hypothesized, adolescents whose mothers have BPD were significantly more preoccupied than were comparisons (\( t(45) = 2.56, p < .05 \)), but contrary to hypothesis, were not more fearful, \( t(44) = .07, p = .94 \).

- **Hypothesis 2**
  - As predicted, mothers’ preoccupied rating was significantly correlated with their adolescents’ preoccupied rating, although mother and adolescent fearful ratings were not correlated significantly. See Table 2.

- **Hypothesis 3**
  - As hypothesized, mothers’ fearful and preoccupied attachment ratings were each positively correlated with all their BPD features.
  - Adolescent preoccupied ratings correlated significantly with adolescent affective instability, identity problems and self-harm; and adolescent fearful ratings correlated significantly with adolescent identity problems, negative relationships, and self-harm. See Table 3.

| Table 2. Correlations between mother and adolescent romantic attachment ratings |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|
|                                      | Adolescent Fearful | Adolescent Preoccupied |
| Mother Fearful                       | -.01              | .09                |
| Mother Preoccupied                  | -.06              | .31*               |

* * p < .05
Table 3. Correlations between romantic attachment ratings and BPD characteristics for mothers and for adolescents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mother</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affective instability</td>
<td>Identity problems</td>
<td>Negative relationships</td>
<td>Self harm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fearful</td>
<td>.47**</td>
<td>.62**</td>
<td>.57**</td>
<td>.67**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>.40*</td>
<td>.64**</td>
<td>.47*</td>
<td>.55**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                  | Adolescent |          |          |          |
|                  | Affective instability | Identity problems | Negative relationships | Self harm |
| Fearful          | .21      | .33*     | .42**    | .32*     |
| Preoccupied      | .41**    | .57**    | .17      | .29†     |

* p < .10; ** p < .05; *** p < .01

Discussion

**Romantic Attachment in Mothers with BPD**

- This study examined romantic attachment in mothers with BPD and their adolescent offspring. BPD was assessed as a categorical diagnosis and also as features along a continuum in the sample as a whole.
- Mothers with BPD had higher ratings of both preoccupied and fearful romantic attachments, and these were positively correlated with all of features of BPD as measured by the borderline scale of the PAI (affective instability, identity problems, and self harm). This replicates prior findings (Agrawal, et al., 2004) and but also extends this research by showing that romantic attachment has a relationship with BPD features.
- Adolescent offspring of mothers with BPD had higher ratings of preoccupied attachments, and these ratings positively correlated with almost all of the BPD features. Preoccupied attachment has been shown to have adverse effects on adolescent development including educational underachievement, increased delinquent behaviors, increased substance use, and promiscuity (Cooper, P. R. Shaver, & Collins, 1998b). This is important because these adversities may increase the interpersonal distress experienced by a population already at risk for psychopathology.
- Furthermore, insecure romantic attachments may play a role in the development of BPD. Insecure romantic attachments in adolescence can lead to disturbances in identity, self-regulation, other interpersonal relations and impulse control, such as with sex and substance use (Cooper, et al., 1998a); (Sroufe, et al., 2005). All of which are associated with symptoms of BPD.
- Adolescent offspring of mothers with BPD did not have higher ratings of fearful attachment. However, this could be due to strong hormonal drives to engage peers or naivety with regards to romantic relationships due to lack of experience.
- Mothers’ preoccupied status was positively correlated with their adolescents’ preoccupied ratings, suggesting a transmission of insecure attachment style.
- Since attachment may be implicated in the development of BPD, present findings reveal the high risk of adolescent offspring of mothers with BPD.
Limitations and Future Directions

- Since the creation of the RQ, a romantic attachment questionnaire specifically for adolescents has been designed. While this might limit the ability to detect intergenerational transmission of romantic attachment in this population, it could provide a more accurate interpretation of the romantic attachment styles of these adolescents.
- The small sample size may have limited the ability to detect significant differences. However, this is the only sample of adolescents whose mothers have BPD ever collected.
- It is important to continue to research BPD from a developmental perspective because many of the core difficulties of BPD are encountered during adolescence (Macfie, in press).
- More research needs to be done to assess the transmission of romantic attachment and its relationship to the development of psychopathology, specifically BPD with longitudinal data.
- Assessing romantic attachment within a developmental psychopathology perspective in may provide a better understanding of the etiology of BPD and help inform preventative interventions.
References


