Rejection Sensitivity: Exploring the Link Between Attachment Pattern and Psycho-Social Adjustment in Early Adolescence

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People may differ in their readiness to perceive and react to rejection. People who view negative interpersonal exchanges in a more benign manner, are better able regulate themselves and make the best of the situation. But those who readily perceive intentional rejection in minor or even imagined insensitiveness of others, react in such a manner that they end up upsetting themselves and others. Such individuals with tendency to anxiously expect rejection from significant others are termed rejection sensitive.

Rejection Sensitivity

Rejection sensitivity (RS) is defined as the cognitive-affective processing disposition to defensively expect, perceive and over-react to perceived rejection by others. People with high RS behave in ways that undermine relationships and are more distressed following rejection. When individuals’ needs are met repeatedly with rejection from their significant others, they tend to expect rejection in their future interactions. This makes them hypervigilent for rejection cues, such that even minimal or ambiguous signs of rejection are perceived as intentional rejection and make them feel rejected.

Rejection sensitive children also showed heightened distress following rejection from peers and they behaved more aggressively and experienced increased interpersonal difficulties and declines in academic functioning over time. Rejection sensitivity was associated to withdrawal and loneliness in adolescents.

Attachment - Rejection Sensitivity link.

A link between attachment and rejection sensitivity can be understood from attachment theory. Children’s expectations about whether they would be accepted and loved or would be rejected by valued others is the core of internal working models. Based on Bowlby’s theory (1980), the RS model by Downey et al (1994) proposes that when parents tend to meet children's expressed needs with rejection, children become sensitive to rejection.
Insecure Attachment and Maladjustment

Secure attachment is typically related to healthier adjustment, where as insecure attachment is linked to various forms of maladjustments. Adolescents with secure attachment to both the parents have been found to have better emotional adjustment, to experience less loneliness, be more ego-resilient, have fewer mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, inattention and conduct problems depression, inattention and delinquent activities.

Rejection Sensitivity as a mediator of Attachment – Maladjustment link.

Attachment theorists have mostly focused on assessing attachment security and testing its implication on adjustment. A significant question concerns the processes or mechanisms through which attachment insecurity could lead to these negative outcomes. Although anxiety about acceptance and fear of rejection is the core of attachment insecurity, the attachment predictors of rejection sensitivity have not yet been tested.

The Present Study

The primary aim of the present study was to examine the mediating role of rejection sensitivity between attachment security and psychosocial adjustment in early adolescence. Based on attachment theory and earlier research findings, it is hypothesized that more insecurely attached adolescents would have higher rejection sensitivity, which in turn lead to greater emotional and behavioral problems. Assessment of adolescent’s attachment security to father and mother separately would enable us to examine attachment predictors of RS separately for each parent. We hypothesize that attachment to mother would be a more significant predictor of RS than attachment to father. We also tested which of the attachment security dimensions were linked to the two types of defensive affect (anxiety and anger) associated to RS as the two were differentially associated to distinctive forms of maladjustment.

The study helps identify processes that link attachment to adjustment and suggests points of intervention for adolescents at risk for emotional and behavioral problems. This is the first attempt to capture the theorized link between rejection sensitivity and attachment pattern in adolescence.

AIMS & OBJECTIVES

The aim of the present study is to assess the attachment pattern of the adolescents in terms of attachment security and attachment styles of coping, and psycho-social functioning in early
adolescence and to understand rejection sensitivity as a link between attachment security and psycho-social adjustment.

OBJECTIVES:
The main objective of the study is:
* To examine rejection sensitivity as a mediating link between attachment security and psychosocial adjustment in early adolescence.

Other objectives of the study are:
- To study rejection sensitivity in early adolescence.
- To study the psychosocial adjustment in terms of presence or absence of internalizing and externalizing behaviour in early adolescence.
- To study attachment security and attachment styles of coping towards mother and father in early adolescence.
- To study effect of gender difference in attachment pattern, rejection sensitivity and psycho-social adjustment in early adolescent girls and boys.
- To study difference in attachment pattern, rejection sensitivity and psycho-social adjustment in early adolescent belonging to different type of schools.
- To examine the association of attachment security and attachment styles of coping with psycho-social adjustment (internalizing and externalizing behaviour) in early adolescence.
- To examine the association of rejection sensitivity with psycho-social adjustment (internalizing and externalizing behaviour) in early adolescence.

HYPOTHESES:
The main hypothesis formulated for the study is that:
- Rejection sensitivity is a mediator in the link between attachment security and psychosocial adjustment in early adolescence.

As the first three objectives are exploratory in nature, hypotheses have not been formulated on those. The hypotheses formulated for the study are:
Attachment security towards mother would be significantly higher than attachment measures towards father in early adolescence.

There are significant gender differences in attachment pattern, rejection sensitivity and psycho-social adjustment in early adolescent girls and boys.

Differences in attachment pattern, rejection sensitivity and psycho-social adjustment between early adolescents belonging to government schools are significant.

There is a significant association of attachment security and attachment styles of coping, with psycho-social adjustment in early adolescence.

There is a significant association of attachment security and attachment styles of coping, with rejection sensitivity in early adolescence.

There is a significant association of rejection sensitivity with psycho-social adjustment in early adolescence.

**METHODOLOGY**

The main goal of the present study is to test whether rejection sensitivity mediated the link between attachment pattern and psycho-social adjustment in early adolescence.

**Measures Used in the Study**

- Semi Structured Interview Schedule-Adolescent and Parent Form (Developed by the researcher)
- Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden and Greenberg, 1987)
- Behavioural Systems Questionnaire (Furman & Wehner, 2001).
- Children’s Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (Downey, 1998)
- Child Behaviour Checklist /6-18 and Youth Self Report (Achenbach, 2001)

**Sample size Estimation:**

Minimum required sample size for studying the relationship between the following variables were calculated based on the results obtained from earlier studies.

**Sampling Method:**

The population to be studied consisted of early adolescents studying in the 8th std in regular schools in Kanayannur Taluk, Ernakulam District, Kerala State, India. All three categories of schools- Government, Aided and Self-financing- were included to ensure that sample consisted of adolescents from all socio-economic strata. From the list of above schools, 11 schools included in
the study were randomly selected depending upon the ratio in which they are distributed among the three categories of schools. In each of the 11 schools included in the study, all adolescents from the randomly selected class who got consent from their parents were included. The final sample number for the study was 406.

**Inclusion criteria:**

- Adolescents aged 12-14 yrs.
- Adolescents who are attending regular school
- Adolescents who are able to read, speak and understand English or Malayalam.

**Exclusion Criteria:**

- Adolescents whose parents were divorced or separated.
- Adolescents whose either of the parents had expired.
- Adolescents who were not given consent by the parent.

**Procedure:**

The study was cross-sectional in design and was carried out in two phases, the pilot study and the main study.

1. **Pilot study:**

   Scales which had not been used in Indian context had to be adapted for the study sample before using them for data collection. All scales were translated to Malayalam also, to be administered to adolescents more comfortable in Malayalam.

2. **Main study:**

   The main study was conducted on 406 adolescents in groups of 10 from the selected schools in Kanayannur Taluk. Main study consisted of the following main steps

   - Listing the Schools that constitute the sampling frame. They were listed in 3 categories – Unaided, Aided & Government Schools.
   - Randomly selecting from each group, the schools to be included in the study.
   - The number from each group calculated based on the ratio of the distribution of schools
   - Main Data collection from the 11 selected schools. Unaided (5), Aided (3) & Government (3) Schools.
RESULTS

Data was obtained on 406 adolescents (Boys: 228 & Girls: 178) from 11 randomly selected schools in the Kanayannur Taluk of Ernakulam District, Kerala State, India. Data was computer analyzed. Analysis was done using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages and parametric statistics like means, standard deviation, student’s t test, ANOVA, Correlation & Regression analysis and Sobel’s test for mediation. All the figures for the means, standard deviations have been rounded off to the nearest two decimal places.

Adolescent & Family Characteristics

Data obtained from the semi-structured interview schedule are presented. Majority of the adolescents (85%) came from nuclear families and most of them (70%) had 1 sibling. Almost all the fathers (99%) were employed while only 30% of mothers were employed. Parents rating of adolescent’s academic performance showed that 52% of adolescents were above average, 37% were average and 11% were below average in their academic performance.

Rejection Sensitivity in Early Adolescence

The two forms of RS, anxious RS and angry RS were strongly correlated, indicating that adolescents who feel anxious in situations they expect rejection, were also likely to feel anger in such situations. The adolescents had significantly higher anxious RS scores than angry RS.

Attachment Security towards Mother and Father In Early Adolescence

Total attachment security, and all the dimensions of attachment to father and mother were positively correlated. Attachment security towards mother was marginally higher than that towards father. On comparing each attachment dimension, communication to mother was marginally higher than to father and this difference was statistically significant, while no significant difference was found in the trust and alienation dimensions of attachment to father and mother.

Attachment Styles of Coping in Early Adolescence

Secure as well as the two insecure styles-dismissive and preoccupied styles of attachment towards father and mother were significantly correlated. The adolescents showed statistically significant higher secure and preoccupied style of coping towards mother than towards father. No significant difference was found in the dismissive style of coping towards mother and father.

Psychosocial Adjustment in Early Adolescence
The self and parent report of all the maladjustment dimensions show significant positive correlations. The correlation for externalizing problems is stronger compared to other maladjustment variables. On comparing the two using paired t-test, the parent rating of maladjustment is significantly lower than the self rating on all the maladjustment variables.

**Gender and SES differences**

Mean scores of early adolescent boys (n=228) and girls(n=178) on rejection sensitivity, attachment security and psycho-social adjustment were compared to study gender differences in these variables.

On examining RS measures, boys had statistically significant marginally higher RS and angry expectations of rejection than girls. There was no significant gender difference in anxious expectations of rejection.

On analyzing adolescent’s attachment security to mother and father, variations were found in gender difference depending on the gender of the parent. Girls reported statistically significant marginally greater attachment security to mother than boys. This statistically significant difference was due to girls reporting higher mutual communication with mother and lower alienation from mother than boys. There as no significant gender difference in attachment security to father.

On self report of maladjustment, boys had statistically significant higher mean scores than girls in all the subscales other than two internalizing problems: somatic complaints and depression, in which there as no significant gender difference. Thus boys were found to have higher externalizing problems, and total problems, while there was no significant gender difference in the internalizing scale. Parental rating of various adjustment problems in their adolescents supported the gender differences found in self report.

Mean scores of early adolescents studying in Government (government and government aided) schools (n=213) and private (self financing) schools (n=193) on rejection sensitivity, attachment security and psycho-social adjustment were compared to study differences due to SES in these variables.

Private school adolescents had statistically significant higher RS, contributed by higher angry expectations of rejection than government school adolescents. There was no significant school type difference in anxious expectations of rejection.

On measures of attachment security to mother and father, government school adolescents reported marginally higher mutual communication and lower alienation
from mother and father than those in private school. Government school adolescents have greater mean scores on secure and preoccupied styles of attachment to mother and higher secure style of attachment to father than those in private schools.

SES differences on adolescent maladjustment were studied by comparing self and parent report of maladjustment variables among adolescents in government and private schools. Adolescents of private school rated themselves higher than government school adolescents on five CBCL subscales: Anxious/Withdrawn, Anxious/Depressed, Aggressive Behaviour, Social Problems and Attention Problems. The private school adolescents were thus higher on internalizing and externalizing syndrome scales as well as the total problems. However, similar differences were not found on examining parental ratings. We expected parents of private school adolescents to rate them higher on problems the adolescents have self-reported as higher. But no significant differences were found in adolescent maladjustment ratings between parents of two types of schools.

**Correlational analysis**

Associations between 1) attachment security and attachment styles of coping, 2) rejection sensitivity and 3) maladjustment were analyzed using partial correlations controlling for effects of gender and school type. In all further analysis, the effect of gender and school type and school type were controlled as these demographic variables were significantly related to several of the studied variables.

Correlations between two psycho-social constructs are usually low, unless the two variables are either a) measuring similar constructs, b) are highly interdependent, or c) have more common rather than unique aspects. Most of the correlation coefficients obtained in the present study were low (in the rage of 0.17 - 0.40), though they were statistically significant due to the large sample size. Hence the low correlations had to be interpreted with caution and are discussed in comparison with other correlations rather than in terms of their actual magnitudes.

**Relationship of Attachment to Mother and Father with Adjustment**

Partial correlation of attachment security and attachment styles of coping with self and parent report of psycho-social adjustment (internalizing, externalizing and total maladjustment) was done to study their relationship among the early adolescents.

Attachment security- the total scale score, and the subscales trust and communication to mother and father were negatively related to youth self reports of internalizing, externalizing and
total problem scores. The above mentioned attachment measures to mother were also related to parent reports of internalizing, externalizing and total problem scores. Correlations involving attachment measures with father were poorly associated to parent report of adjustment problems. Alienation from mother and father was positively related to internalizing, externalizing and total problem scores.

Overall, attachment measures to mother compared to father showed stronger association. Associations to self report of adjustment problems were stronger than to parent reports of adjustment problems. Of the three components of attachment, alienation from mother and father was more strongly associated to maladjustment than trust and communication. Though significant, all these correlations were comparatively weak (between 0.1 - 0.4).

Secure style of attachment to mother showed statistically significant negative association to youth self report of internalizing, externalizing and total problem scores. All other associations involving secure style of attachment to mother and father were not significant. Preoccupied style of attachment to mother and father showed statistically significant positive association to self and parent reports of internalizing, externalizing and total problem scores. Dismissive style of attachment to mother and father showed significantly positive association to self report of internalizing and total problem scores. All other associations involving dismissive style of attachment to mother and father were positive but not statistically significant.

Overall, preoccupied attachment style appeared to show stronger positive association to maladjustment measures.

Relationship of Attachment to Mother & Father with Rejection Sensitivity

Partial correlation of attachment security and attachment styles of coping with rejection sensitivity was done to study their relationship among the early adolescents. Statistically significant correlations were found between rejection sensitivity measures and all the attachment security measures except communication to father, which was negatively associated to RS measures, but failed to reach significant level. Total attachment security- and the subscales trust and communication to mother were negatively related RS measures. Total attachment security and trust to father were negatively related RS measures. Alienation from mother and father were positively related to RS measures. Overall, correlations between attachment to mother and RS variables were comparatively stronger than attachment to father and RS variables.

Relationship between Rejection Sensitivity & Adjustment
Partial correlation of RS measures with self and parent report of psycho-social adjustment (internalizing, externalizing and total maladjustment) was done to study their relationship among the early adolescents. Total RS, Anxious and Angry RS were positively associated to self and parent report of internalizing, externalizing and total problem. RS measures showed stronger association to self and parent report of internalizing than externalizing problems.

**Mediational Analysis**

The proposed mediation models were tested according to Baron and Kenny’s (1986) four steps for establishing mediation.

Four mediation models were tested to find if RS mediated the link between attachment insecurity to mother and father and the two dependent variables: self and parent report of psychosocial adjustment in the adolescent. In all the four models, the direct effect after controlling for RS was less than the indirect effect of attachment insecurity on dependent variables. The direct effect did not completely disappear suggesting that mediation would be partial if found significant. The Sobel’s test coefficient was calculated to find if the mediation was significant, i.e., if change in the indirect effect (without controlling for the mediator) to direct effect (after controlling for the mediator) is significant. Results show that the all four mediations were statistically significant; indicating that rejection sensitivity partially mediated the link between attachment insecurity to mother and father, and maladjustment in adolescents as reported by self and the parents.

**DISCUSSION**

The current study examines the relationship between attachment pattern, rejection sensitivity and psychosocial adjustment and tested whether rejection sensitivity mediated the link between attachment security and psychosocial adjustment in early adolescents. Gender and SES differences in the above constructs were also explored.

The study was done on 406 Indian adolescent boys and girls between the ages 12-14 yrs from 11 randomly selected Government, Aided and Self-financing schools in Kanayannur Taluk of Ernakulam District in Kerala.

The hypothesis that attachment security towards mother would be higher than attachment measures towards father in early adolescence was supported by the results. Greater mutual communication between adolescent and mother than with father has contributed to the higher total attachment security towards mother. Total attachment security, and all the dimensions of
attachment to father and mother were significantly correlated. This supports earlier research findings that attachment classification to mother and father were interdependent.

Gender differences were evident in several of the variables. Higher angry expectations of rejection in boys than girls could be due to socialization and gender role stereotypes. Girls reported greater attachment security to mother while there as no significant gender difference in attachment security to father. Higher mutual communication with mother and lower alienation from mother in girls than boys has contributed to the difference. This finding stresses the importance of taking the gender of the adolescent as well as the parent into consideration. As expected, boys had higher externalizing problems than girls. Thought it was expected that girls would have higher internalizing problems than boys, no such difference was found. Factors that could make Indian boys a more vulnerable gender are explored.

Though a number of studies have found lower SES as increasing risk for psychopathology, several contrary findings such as higher anxious RS, lesser attachment security and greater self reports of adjustment problem in the more affluent private school adolescents point to unique stressors in adolescents of higher SES.

Attachment measures to mother compared to father showed stronger association to psychosocial adjustment. Similar trend was noticed in the negative association between attachment security and RS. The finding that communication with father had no significant influence on levels of RS, may be unique to Indian kind of family interactions.

Significant negative association between rejection sensitivity with psycho-social adjustment among Indian early adolescents help generalize similar findings among U.S adolescents.

The main hypothesis that RS is a mediator in the link between attachment security and psychosocial adjustment in early adolescence was partially confirmed. The partial mediation suggests several possibilities.

**Strengths, Limitations and Future Direction**

The study was done on a large sample and data was collected using language most comfortable for the adolescent. Attempts were made to study gender and SES differences in the researched constructs. Attachment to mother and father were separately assessed leading to several interesting differences in attachment to each parent and its relation to RS and maladjustment in early adolescents. Some of the limitations of the study are: as
the study is cross sectional in nature, causal relations could not be studied. Exploring the mediating link of RS in a longitudinal study would aid in establishing the direction of this link. The attachment and RS variables were from the adolescent itself and not from two independent raters. The entire data was collected from adolescents in Cochin; hence the study would have to be replicated in other regions of India to generalize the findings to Indian adolescents.

**Conclusion**

The study is an attempt to capture the theorized link between rejection sensitivity and attachment pattern in adolescence and to test whether rejection sensitivity mediated the link between attachment insecurity and maladjustment in adolescents. Rejection sensitivity was found to partially mediate the association between attachment security and psychosocial adjustment in early adolescence. The study provides support for the hypothesis that attachment security, rejection sensitivity and psychosocial adjustment are associated in early adolescence. Statistically significant marginal gender and SES differences were found in attachment security, rejection sensitivity and psychosocial adjustment. The study also provides normative data on attachment security, rejection sensitivity and Child Behaviour Checklist in the absence of published studies with Indian adolescents.