

Do Attachment Styles in Preadolescence Predict Target-Specific Aggression?

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Introduction

A vast literature is dedicated to predicting change in aggression in preadolescence. One understudied predictor of aggression in preadolescence is attachment style in relationships with friends. In adults, romantic attachment styles predict aggression toward specific target types, with some evidence suggesting that an attachment style predicts aggression toward targets with a conflicting attachment style.

For instance, avoidant attachment in males is associated with a preference for vulnerable preoccupied female dating partners, whereas preoccupied attachment in females is associated with a preference for abusive male dating partners (Zayas & Shoda, 2010).

The current study attempted to identify salient features of the victims of preoccupied and avoidant preadolescents, using a new measure of attachment style with same-sex friends.

Hypotheses

We hypothesize that preoccupied children would target peers who ignored or did not attend to them (e.g., avoidant targets or targets whom they perceived as disliking them), whereas avoidant children would target peers who demanded their personal attention (e.g., needy preoccupied targets or depressed/ruminating targets).

Method

Participants were 195 preadolescents attending an ethnically/racially diverse school (M age = 10.2 years). All measures were collected in both fall and spring of a school year. A new self-report measure of attachment to friends was developed for this study. Responses ranged from “Disagree Strongly” to “Agree Strongly.” Sample items are provided below:

Preoccupied Attachment:

- I need my friends to tell me they like me.
- I get upset or angry when my friends don't want to hang out with me.

Avoidant Attachment:

- I find it uncomfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings with my friends.
- I do not like to be too close to my friends.

Analysis Plan

❖ A Level-1 equation computed, for each subject, a within-subject beta predicting the child's Time-2 aggression toward classmates from each of five Time-1 target features (controlling Time-1 aggression toward each target, the target's average victimization, and the target's aggression toward the participant).

❖ The Level-2 equation predicted each of the within-subject betas from between-subject measures of age, sex, trait aggression (average aggression toward all classmates), either avoidant attachment or preoccupied attachment. Interactions with child sex were also explored.

Results

Level-1 Equation

$$\text{Time-2 Aggression Toward Target} = b_0 + b_1^*(\text{Time-1 Aggression Toward Target}) + b_2^*(\text{Target Feature}) + b_3^*(\text{Time-1 Aggression From Target}) + b_4^*(\text{Time-1 Average Victimization of Target}) + r$$

Level-2 Equation

$$b_2 = \gamma + \gamma^*(\text{Time-1 Average Aggression}) + \gamma^*(\text{Age}) + \gamma^*(\text{Sex}) + \gamma^*(\text{Time-1 Attachment Style}) + \gamma^*(\text{Time-1 Attachment Style} \times \text{Sex}) + u$$

Change in Aggression Toward Specific Targets as a Function of Participant Attachment Style

Level-2 Predictors	Level-1 outcome				
	Aggression toward avoidant targets	Aggression toward targets who dislike the participant	Aggression toward preoccupied targets	Aggression toward internalizing targets	Aggression toward prosocial-attractive targets
Preoccupied Attachment	γ	γ	γ	γ	γ
Intercept	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00
Age	.00	.00	-.00	-.00	.00
Sex	.01	-.00	.00	-.00	-.00
Average aggression	-.01	-.05	.05	.09	-.07
Preoccupied attachment	-.00	.00	.00	.00	.01
Preoccupied attachment x sex	.00	.00	.00	-.01	.00
Avoidant Attachment	γ	γ	γ	γ	γ
Intercept	-0.00	-0.00	.00	.00	-.00
Age	.00	.00	-.00	-.00	.00
Sex	.00	-.00	.00	-.00	-.01
Average aggression	-.01	-.04	.05	.10	-.07
Avoidant attachment	.01	.00	.00	.00	.00
Avoidant attachment x sex	-.01	.00	-.00	-.01*	-.00

Note: Bolded entries are significant at $p < .05$. All Level-2 variables were grand-mean centered.
*Effect was significant for girls, but not for boys.

Conclusions

- Preadolescents' friendship attachment styles affect their choices of victims.
- Avoidant girls who have an aversion to emotional closeness, increasingly victimized girls who were depressed and anxious, perhaps because they lack empathy for them or interpret their symptoms as irritating attempts to gain their attention.
- Preoccupied children, who seek closeness and attention, increasingly victimized prosocial/attractive peers, perhaps because they perceive these peers as rivals for attention.