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Research News

Borderline Personality Disorder May Be Primary Personality Disorder

BY CARLA SHARP, PhD

RESEARCH DIRECTOR, ADOLESCENT TREATMENT PROGRAM

Research Is All About Collaboration

Our work at the Adolescent Treatment Program is not possible without the collaboration of parents and adolescents who generously donate their time and energy to share thoughts and feelings with us. Similarly, our work is not possible without strong collaboration between the research and clinical teams at the Adolescent Treatment Program.

Adult and Adolescent Joint Research

Another important collaboration, which recently led to an interesting project, is the collaboration between the research teams overseeing research with the adult units at The Menninger Clinic and our own research team overseeing research at the Adolescent Treatment Program. Specifically, the adult team conducted diagnostic interviews with 966 adult patients at The Menninger Clinic. Following the interviews, with collaborators outside The Menninger Clinic, we used advanced factor analytic techniques to investigate whether the traditional personality disorders existed in our data.

We found that a general dimension of disordered personality underlies the covariance between separate personality disorders. In other words, there is a common factor to all personality pathology, and this common factor mirrors the characteristics of Borderline Personality Disorder. In essence, Borderline Personality Disorder may therefore be the “primary” personality disorder.

This is an important finding because it fits well with some of the new formulations of personality pathology as suggested in the new Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-5 (DSM 5).

These results were presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Personality Assessment in March 2014.

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Empathy in Borderline Personality Disorder Studied

BY ALLISON KALPAKCI, BA • RESEARCH ASSISTANT

Several theories characterize borderline personality disorder (BPD) as a psychiatric condition marked by interpersonal disturbance (Linehan, 1993; Fonagy & Luyten, 2009). Studies have recently examined the role of empathy in this dysfunction; however, findings have been inconsistent with some reporting impairment and others reporting no deficiency.

Harari et al. (2010) elucidated these inconsistencies by demonstrating a “double dissociation” in empathy in BPD, such that there is impairment in cognitive empathy, or the ability to understand another’s perspective and experience, but an over-activation of affective empathy, or the capacity to share the emotional experiences of another person. It has been theorized that this dissociation stems from top-down, controlled cognitive empathic processes failing to temper

bottom-up, automatic affective empathic responses (Eippert et al., 2007); however, it is unclear mechanistically what accounts for this dysfunction. Further, no studies have examined empathy in adolescents with the disorder.

Nature of BPD

Two psychological processes central to borderline pathology are difficulties in emotion regulation (ER; highly uncontrolled emotional reactivity) and hypermentalizing (incorrect, over-inference of thoughts and feelings in self and others). Together, these processes may disrupt empathic processing, ultimately relating to the impairment of cognitive empathy and over-activation of affective empathy.

Results of Study

The aim of our study was to examine the role of ER and hypermentaliza-

tion in empathic functioning in female adolescents with BPD. Results revealed that emotion dysregulation related to increased affective empathy, but was not related to cognitive empathy. Results also revealed that hypermentalizing related to decreased cognitive empathy, but was not related to affective empathy.

These findings tentatively provide evidence for unique and differential relations among these processes. That is, emotion dysregulation may relate specifically to overactive affective empathy, and hypermentalizing may relate specifically to impaired cognitive empathy accuracy in adolescents with BPD.

This study was presented at the Annual Meeting for the Society for Research on Adolescents in March 2014 in Austin, Texas.

New Community Partners Enrich Collaboration

BY CAROLYN HA, MA

An exciting collaboration between Dr. Carla Sharp’s Developmental Psychopathology Lab at the University of Houston, DeBakey High School and the Medical Venturing Scouts has recently been formed for the recruitment of adolescents from the community to compare adolescent behavior between adolescents recruited from the community with our teens at The Menninger Clinic. We will also be able to invite teens from the community to participate in the McNair Initiative for Neuroscience Discovery at Menninger and Baylor College of Medicine (MIND-MB) study. This innovative project seeks to understand the neurobiological and genetic mechanisms underlying psychiatric disorders in adolescents.

Data collected from adolescents in the community will be integral in providing insight into the onset and treatment of psychiatric disorders. Knowledge of normative behavioral, brain and genetic mechanisms in these adolescents in comparison with teens hospitalized for psychiatric problems may help researchers identify key resilience and protective factors that can then be applied to the treatment of adolescents or used for preventative care. A wealth of

additional research questions may be investigated using the dataset to shed light on adolescent functioning in relation to neurobiological, psychological and behavioral processes as well as how these processes may go awry in adolescents with mental health related problems.

We are excited about our partnership with the health science teachers and the principal at DeBakey High School along with the Medical Venturing Scouts, and look forward to working with our community partners.



At Houston's DeBakey High School for Health Professions, research assistant Tessa Long and graduate student Will Mellick recruit healthy students for ATP's studies.

Experiential Avoidance in Relation to Attachment and Theory of Mind

BY SALOME VANWORDEN, BA • RESEARCH COORDINATOR II

Theory of mind, or mentalizing, is the ability to attribute beliefs, intentions and desires to oneself and others (Premack & Woodruff, 1978). This capacity facilitates positive outcomes through the lifespan, including maintenance of healthy interpersonal relationships.

Peter Fonagy, a leading researcher in attachment and mentalizing and consultant to our research team at the Adolescent Treatment Program of The Menninger Clinic, hypothesized that secure attachment relationships to caregivers in infancy teaches infants to tolerate and regulate negative emotional states. An attuned caregiver tends to an infant's negative affective state by a) showing sensitivity toward the infant's emotional expression; b) mirroring and labeling the infant's emotional states; and c) remaining regulated himself. This fosters a se-

ecure attachment relationship and gives infants a second-order representation of their own mental states as able to be manipulated and regulated (Fonagy, 2007). These actions support an infant's development of mentalizing.

Although connections between attachment and mentalizing have been shown in previous research, little is known about the mechanism through which attachment influences the capacity to mentalize. This study strives to determine whether experiential avoidance or "an unwillingness to remain in contact with uncomfortable private events by escaping or avoiding these experiences" (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996, p. 1154) represents one of these mechanisms.

The ability to reflect on the minds of others is assumed to partially depend on the ability to recognize and accept mental states in the self. Thus, a reasonable hypothesis is that an individual who has defensively excluded (experiential avoidance) the processing of negative emotions has not learned to fully reflect on these negative emotions. Without the proper use and reflection on mental states within one's own mind, this same reflec-

tion on others' mental states can be impaired. Research by Samson (2009) demonstrated there is a separate, higher-order pathway in the brain utilized to represent intentions and beliefs. An individual must construct the mental experience of another using memory of his own similar experiences. Without a fully integrated memory of negative emotional experiences, this mentalizing pathway may be impaired.

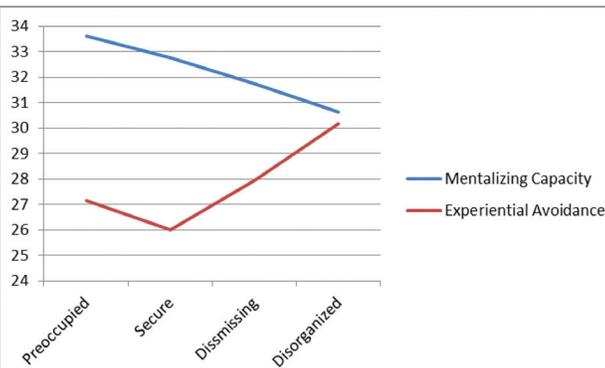
Our Findings

Our study confirmed this hypothesis; a mediation analysis showed that experiential avoidance explained the relationship between attachment classification with an adolescent's mother and the adolescent's subsequent mentalizing capacity. Girls with a disorganized (insecure) attachment with their mothers were set apart from other girls by lower mentalizing capacity and a higher likelihood to experientially avoid. This study was presented at the Annual Meeting for the Society for Research on Adolescents in March 2014 in Austin, Texas.

The Bottom Line

Insecure attachment with an attachment figure can occur by several pathways, generally involving the complex interactions between parental and child temperament and parenting styles.

Mentalizing Capacity & Experiential Avoidance in Groups of Female Patients Based on Maternal Attachment Style



New Statistical Techniques Applied to ATP's Data

Adult and adolescent research teams recently participated in a three-day workshop led by Dr. John Elhai from the University of Toledo. Dr. Elhai introduced advanced statistical approaches including Exploratory Factor Analysis, Confirmatory Factor Analysis

and Structural Equation Modeling using *Mplus* Statistical Software.

This workshop will enable us to take novel approaches to analyzing ATP patients' information in the dataset.

Newsletter Editors

Allison Kalpakci

Salome Vanworden

Sound Familiar?

Music Raises Questions Between Parents & Teens

BY ELIZABETH NEWLIN, MD • DIRECTOR, ADOLESCENT TREATMENT PROGRAM



Long before the “emo” generation, parents questioned the influence of music on impressionable youth. Recently an adolescent shared with me the importance of music in her recovery. She shared listening to “emo” music provided her with a new sense of belonging to a larger community. Her parents expressed concern that listening to increasingly “dark” music might have contributed to her recent peak in depressive symptoms.

The relationship between adolescents and music is complicated. Music plays an important role in adolescent socialization, identity formation, and has affect regulation potential. Studies show adolescents listen to music daily two to eight hours (Council on Communications and Media Pediatrics, 2009).

Music is an important form of communication, providing words for adolescents struggling to communicate increasingly complex emotions and experiences.

Rapid growth in cognitive-emotional capacity, technology driven over-exposure and expanding awareness result in adolescents rapidly overwhelmed by adult world difficulties. Adolescents grieving the loss of protection by an idealized parental superhero and rapidly confronting adult world hypocrisies often turn to music that validates this perception of the world. For some, music offers a safer venue for rebelling against authority figures or the establishment (Brown & Hende, 1989).

Music supports identity formation and group affiliation. Music provides a quick means of establishing a group affiliation where common interests are reinforced.

Music provides common humanity. Adolescents struggling with emotional difficulties or psychiatric illness often select music that matches their emotions. A depressed teen listening to music with themes of isolation and despair might seem contradictory. However, a three-minute soundtrack may offer a sense of belonging and comfort, reducing the adolescent’s suffering and sense of isolation.

Parents’ and professionals’ demonstrated interest in the music of our culture benefits adolescents. Music has significant influence on mood and thus behavior. Studies have documented music’s influence on adolescent self-injury, suicidality, substance use, promiscuity and violence. A recent study revealed the average

adolescent is exposed to over 80 references to substance use each day while listening to music. References depict the social use of illicit substances with a positive social outcome (Primack et al., 2008).

Talk with your teen about their music. Research supports that interest in their music is likely to correlate with their behavioral response (Roberts et al., 1998). A relationship with an adolescent which includes curiosity, openness and a lack of judgment provides a space promoting reflection and joint exploration around the choices and influences in life.

Hopefully, an open dialogue increases the likelihood that the adolescent will consider how and when he listens to various playlists.

Parents may find some music offensive and attempt to eliminate an adolescent’s access. Strong reaction and coercive efforts are likely to illicit great rebellion and reduce communication. This era of internet radio and inexpensive media players limits a parent’s control over exposure to musical influence. A more thoughtful, collaborative approach is more likely to offer a teen the opportunity to develop the internal guide needed in our culture.

Thanks for Your Collaboration, Parents

My name is Tessa Long, and I am a senior at the University of Houston working towards becoming a competitive applicant for clinical psychology training.

This summer I worked on a project with Dr. Carla Sharp and Salome Vanworden, looking at rates of self-harm in adolescents with comorbid depression

and ADHD. Working at the lab and The Menninger Clinic has broadened my research interests.

I have had the opportunity to speak with some of you during diagnostic admission interviews and follow-up calls. Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedules to speak with me.

