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Adult Attachment and Parenting Stress among Parents of Toddlers

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Abstract

Objective: The aim was to revise the dimensionality of the Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ) assessing adult attachment and relate it to parenting stress within a large sample of parents of toddlers. **Methods:** As part of a longitudinal population-based study, 8122 parents (97% mothers) completed the 18 item version of RSQ and the Swedish Parenthood Stress Questionnaire (SPSQ) when their child was 2-3 years of age. **Results:** Exploratory factor analyses gave three uncorrelated RSQ-factors named (1) Importance of Independence, (2) Relationship-related Anxiety, and (3) Discomfort with Closeness, with Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.65$. In a linear regression Parenting Stress was most closely related to Relationship-related Anxiety ($b=0.20$, $t=39.0$), weaker associations were found with the attachment dimensions capturing avoidance: Importance of Independence ($b=0.07$, $t=13.40$) and Discomfort with Closeness ($b=0.07$, $t=12.04$). The SPSQ-subcales Incompetence ($R^2 = 17\%$) and Social Isolation ($R^2 = 22\%$) showed stronger association with adult attachment than the remaining three. **Conclusion:** The agreement with previous findings in other study populations indicates that substantial and meaningful dimensions of attachment have been captured. Attachment anxiety and discomfort with closeness seem to have an important relationship with the perception of parenting stress, especially concerning feelings of incompetence and social isolation.

Introduction

The family plays an important role in a child's experience of stressful events and in the potential coping strategies used. The quality of the relationship between children and their caregivers is important for children's development, emotional regulation, and for learning how to cope with stress. Psychological stress in the family has been linked to a biological stress-reaction (activation of the HPA-axis/increased cortisol) within the child (Essex et al., 2002; Koch, Ludvigsson, & Sepa, 2010; Turner-Cobb, 2005) and negative effects on child health such as obesity (Koch, Sepa, & Ludvigsson, 2008) and diabetes-related autoimmunity (Sepa et al., 2005).

The theory of adult attachment (e.g. Collins & Read, 1990; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994a; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) has been used as a framework to understand romantic relationships between adults and how the current relationship is influenced by experiences of earlier relationships, mainly the primary one with a caregiver. The way the parents act in intimate relationships might affect the level of stress in the family, for example by affecting the parent's perception of and coping with stressful events, since attachment style both regulates the ability to cope with stress and the willingness to seek, as well as the possibility to benefit from, social support (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Fraley & Shaver, 1998; Moreira et al., 2003; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992; Simpson et al., 2002). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that attachment style may also affect parenting stress.

In large epidemiological studies, we are obliged to use self-report measures and it is necessary to continue the development of existing instruments, such as those assessing adult attachment style. The current study aims to revise the dimensionality of a self-report questionnaire for adult attachment and relate it to a validated instrument for parenting stress within a population of parents of toddlers.

Different self-report questionnaires measuring adult attachment are available (e.g.

Collins & Read, 1990; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan 1992; for a review see Ravitz et al., 2010). The Relationship Scale Questionnaire (RSQ; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994b) was used in the current study. To our knowledge, RSQ has only been validated on samples consisting of students (Bäckström & Holmes, 2001; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994b; Roisman et al., 2007), couples where a majority were non-cohabiting young adults probably without children (Stein et al., 2002), or older adults without small children (Kurdek, 2002). Originally, the RSQ was designed to capture the two attachment-related dimensions 'Model of Other' and 'Model of Self'. However, since 2000, the year our data were collected, less satisfactory goodness-of-fit values have been found for that model (Kurdek, 2002; Roisman et al., 2007). The current study aims to investigate the fit of the new RSQ-factors within a population of parents of toddlers.

In this study parenting stress is understood to occur as the result of a perceived discrepancy between the specific demands associated with being a parent and the parent's personal resources (Östberg, Hagekull, & Hagelin, 2007). Two studies have investigated attachment style and the relationship with parenting stress. The first found more stress in several domains of parenting among parents with fearful attachment styles (Vasquez, Durik, & Hyde, 2002), and the second found more parenting stress among avoidantly attached parents after birth of their first child (Rholes, Simpson, & Friedman, 2006). Psychological factors such as general anxiety and low self-esteem have also been found to predict parenting stress in mothers of 2 to 3 year old children (Saisto et al., 2008). Other studies have also reported that individuals with a more anxious attachment style both experience and report more emotional distress (Collins, 1996; Fraley & Shaver, 1998). Based on the previous literature we predicted positive associations between attachment avoidance as well as anxiety and parenting stress.

Method

Participants and procedure

The current study is a part of a population based longitudinal cohort study aiming to study child health. Of all families expecting a child in the region between October 1997 and October 1999, 79% (17 055) chose to participate. Questionnaire data were collected at six time points (at birth and at 1, 2-3, 5-6, 8 and 10-12 years of age); the current study uses questionnaire data collected when the children were 2-3 years old; 8122 completed the whole RSQ of whom 97% ($n = 7852$) were mothers and 3% ($n = 270$) fathers, see Table 1.

A total of 16070 parents completed the questionnaire at birth and 8122 (51%) at 2-3 years, giving a drop out of 49%. The attrition analysis indicated that parents not born in Sweden, single parents, or parents with more children were somewhat less likely to participate, whereas older parents and parents with higher education were somewhat more likely to participate, see Table 1.

Data were collected in connection with a regular check up at the well baby clinic, utilized by around 99% of all parents in the country. There were no instructions indicating which parent should answer the questionnaire and no reminders were used.

Measures

Adult attachment styles were assessed with a translation of the *Relationship Scale Questionnaire* (RSQ; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994b) consisting of 18 items on 7-point Likert-scales ranging from *not at all like me* to *very much like me*. In the original scale construction, item 6 was used in two subscales (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994b). In our translation of item 2 (“It is very important to me to feel independent”) and item 19 (“It is very important to me to feel self-sufficient”) the same Swedish word was unfortunately used for “independent” and “self-sufficient”, giving two identically worded items.

Consequently, item 19 was excluded giving 16 unique items for the analyses.

Table 1:

Descriptive of demographic variables and dropout analysis with multiple logistic regression.

Variable
Age (<i>Mean (SD)</i>)
Born outside Sweden
Education - compulsory 9 years
Education - secondary school 10-12 years
Education - university level at least 1 year
Single parent
Number of children (<i>Median</i>)
<i>n</i>
*1 Multiple logistic regression predicting completion of 2 year follow up or not by demographic factors at birth
*2 All $OR < 0.001$ except education university level $p = 0.002$
*3 In the logistic regression/dropout analysis 0=both parents born in Sweden 1=one or both parents born outside Sweden
*4 Missing cases $n = 737$

Parenting stress was assessed with the *Swedish Parenting Stress Questionnaire* (SPSQ), which is a translation and reconstruction of the Parenting Stress Index (Abidin, 1990) validated for Swedish conditions (Östberg, Hagekull, & Wettergren, 1997). The SPSQ consists of 34 items across five subscales: Incompetence (11 items), Role Restriction (7 items), Social Isolation (7 items), Spouse Relationship Problems (5 items), and Health Problems (4 items). Together these five subscales form an overall parenting stress score. SPSQ has shown good construct validity as it relates to common stressors and is theoretically associated factors such as social support and child fussyness-difficultness (Östberg, Hagekull, & Wettergren, 1997; Östberg & Hagekull, 2000; Östberg, Hagekull, & Hagelin, 2007). The SPSQ has also shown good stability over time (test-retest correlation

over 30 days: $r = 0.89$, and $0.86 \leq r \leq 0.79$ for each subscale) and acceptable homogeneity (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$, and $\alpha > 0.68$ for each subscale; Östberg, Hagekull, & Wettergren, 1997). The statistical reliability for SPSQ in our sample was good: Complete scale $\alpha = .89$, Incompetence $\alpha = .82$, Role Restriction $\alpha = .80$, Spouse Relationship Problems $\alpha = .77$, Social Isolation $\alpha = .71$, and Health Problems $\alpha = .60$. In the current study, each item was assessed on a 6-point Likert-scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, a stress score for each individual was calculated as the mean of the items included in each subscale (after reversing reversed items). In order to make it possible for single parents to participate, the inclusion criterion was set to 29 (of 34) questions answered on the complete scale (i.e. allowing internal dropout concerning the spouse relationship subscale).

Demographic variables used were: *parental gender* (mother/father); *parental age* when the target child was born; *level of education* in three categories (compulsory school 9 years/secondary school 10-12 years/university for at least 1 year); *parental origin* (born in Sweden/born abroad); *marital status* (living with partner/being a single parent); and *number of children* (1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or more) which was approximated by the number of siblings of the target child.

Statistics

Revision of the RSQ

Exploratory factor analysis was used to revise RSQ. To avoid multicollinearity in later analyses varimax rotation was used. Items were excluded stepwise until each item had one strong loading ($> |0.50|$; Hair et al., 1998) on one factor.

Confirmatory factor analysis was used to compare the goodness-of-fit values between our and Griffin and Bartholomew's original factor structure. A root mean square error of

approximation (*RMSEA*) of < 0.05 was considered a good fit and $0.05 - 0.08$ an acceptable fit (Hair et al., 1998). A comparative fit index (*CFI*) between $0.90 - 0.95$ is recommended (McDonald & Ho, 2002) whereas a $CFI < 0.80$ should be seriously considered (Blunch, 2008). The intention of the current study was to compare two models derived from exploratory factor analysis rather than increase the fit of a structural equation model. Therefore, a $CFI > 0.80$ could be accepted especially in combination with a $RMSEA < 0.08$.

Associations with parenting stress

Associations were examined by a hierarchical linear regression where each SPSQ scale was set as response variable. Demographic variables were used to adjust the level of parenting stress before investigating its associations to attachment style. Gender-effect for the fathers was modelled as interaction-variables with each RSQ-style. Predictor variables were included as steps in the following order: (1) demographic variables, (2) RSQ dimensions, (3) gender-interactions, and (4) interaction-terms with the remaining demographic variables. A p -value of < 0.05 was considered statistically significant for step one to three. Due to the large number of interaction-terms in step four (6 demographic variables $\times$ 3 RSQ styles = 18 interaction variables) simultaneous tests of β_j with Bonferroni correction – family level of significance at 0.05 (every β_j was tested on $\alpha = 0.05/18 = 0.0028$) – was used to lower the risk of chance findings. For every SPSQ outcome (Complete scale and five subscales) a regression model was fitted; hence, in total, six models were tested. The assumption of linearity was tested separately by adding quadratic terms of the RSQ as step 3 after adding demographic variables and the linear terms of the RSQ dimensions. Statistical analyses were performed in PASW Statistics 18 Release 18.0.0 and in Amos 18.0.0.

Results

Reconstruction of RSQ

The initial exploratory factor analyses gave rise to four factors for mothers and four for fathers with eigenvalues greater than one (latent root criterion). These were adjusted into three-factor solutions according to the scree-plots. Three items were excluded for mothers (item 5, 15, and 12) and two for fathers (item 15, 12). The final three-factor solutions are presented in Table 2. The new attachment styles were named (1) Importance of Independence, (2) Relationship-related Anxiety, and (3) Discomfort with Closeness. Each dimensions had Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.65$, indicating acceptable reliability (Hair et al., 1998). Intercorrelations between the styles were close to zero due to Varimax rotation. Oblim rotation was also tested but hardly made any difference (data not shown). The revised 14-item instrument was called the Swedish Relationship Scales Questionnaire (SwRSQ-14).

The confirmatory factor analysis of the original model (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994b), with two uncorrelated factors: (1) Model of Other and (2) Model of Self, gave $CFI = 0.62$ and $RMSEA = 0.081$, indicated that the original model did not have an acceptable goodness-of-fit in our sample. The 3-factor model developed in the current study yielded a $CFI = 0.82$ and a $RMSEA = 0.060$, indicating a valuable improvement, even if not quite an excellent fit. The three new dimensions were judged more suitable for the assessment of attachment styles in a Swedish sample of parents than were the original two. However, had we chosen a two-factor model, the exploratory factor analysis would have merged Importance of Independence and Discomfort with Closeness into one factor (data not shown). Analyses of the association between the original two factors and our three new factors yielded strong correlations between Model of Self and Relationship-related Anxiety

Table 2

*Exploratory factor analyses of RSQ: Factor loadings*¹, eigenvalues, proportion of variance, factor names and Cronbach's alpha.*

Item no. and classification* ²	Question	Mothers (n=7852)			Fathers (n=270)		
		Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
1, Fear	I find it difficult to depend on other people.	0,69			0,58		
2 (19), Dis* ³	It is very important to me to feel independent (self-sufficient).	0,68			0,71		
22, Dis	I prefer not to have other people depend on me.	0,50			0,64		
26, Dis	I prefer not to depend on others.	0,77			0,80		
10, Sec	I am comfortable depending on other people.	-0,69			-0,65	0,34	
5, Fear	I worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to others.	excluded from the analysis* ⁵				0,61	
16, Pre	I worry that others don't value me as much as I value them.		0,78			0,75	
25, Pre	I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like.		0,70			0,66	
28, Sec	I worry about having others not accept me. (reversed)		-0,78			-0,74	
9, Dis	I worry about being alone. (reversed)		-0,61			-0,54	
6, Dis/Pre-R* ⁴	I am comfortable without close emotional relationships.			0,71			0,69
24, Fear	I am uncomfortable being close to others.			0,66			0,64
3, Sec	I find it easy to get emotionally close to others.			-0,69			-0,67
8, Pre	I want to be completely emotionally intimate with others.			-0,71			-0,74
15, Sec	I am comfortable having other people depend on me.	excluded from the analysis* ⁵			excluded from the analysis* ⁵		

12, Fear	I find it difficult to trust others completely.	excluded from the analysis* ⁵			excluded from the analysis* ⁵		
Eigenvalue before rotation		2,8	2,2	1,7	2,9	2,4	1,6
Proportion of the total variance after varimax rotation		18,0%	17,6%	16,2%	17,6%	17,5%	14,7%
Factor name		<i>Important with independence</i>	<i>Relationship related anxiety</i>	<i>Discomfort with closeness</i>	<i>Important with independence</i>	<i>Relationship related anxiety</i>	<i>Discomfort with closeness</i>
Cronbach's α		0,70	0,70	0,67	0,71	0,70	0,65

*¹ Loadings <|0.30| has been counts as zero and are not presented.

*² Original RSQ item number and attachment classification (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Fear = Fearful, Dis = Dismissing, Sec = Secure, Pre = Preoccupied.

*³ Item 2 and 19 had the same wording in the Swedish translation.

*⁴ Item used twice, as dissmising and preoccupid (R = reversed coding), in the original RSQ scale construction (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994).

*⁵ Item excluded from final factor solution due to no strong loadings.

($r = 0.75, p < 0.001$), and between Model of Other and Importance of Independence ($r = 0.75, p < 0.001$) as well as between Model of Other and Discomfort with Closeness ($r = 0.66, p < 0.001$). The remaining three correlations were weak ($r < 0.19$).

Associations with parenting stress

The three factors measuring attachment styles together (step 2) showed significant associations with overall Parenting Stress as well as with each subscale after controlling for demographic variables (step 1), see Table 3. Cronbach's α was not substantially lower for the SPSQ-subscales with lower R^2 (except for Health Problems), indicating that the findings not were due different amounts of measurement error in the different SPSQ-subscales. No significant gender-effect (step 3) was found, see Table 3.

Differences between the subgroups were explored by interaction-effects (step 4). Significant effects were found for the group of parents born outside Sweden, and the subgroup of single parents, see Table 3. The quadratic terms of the three SwRSQ-14 subscales increased the R^2 less than 1% for all SPSQ-scales (data not shown), as they added no major improvement linearity was assumed.

Table 3

*Hierarchical*1 multiple linear regression predicting SPSQ complete scale and subscales.*

	Complete scale (n=7728)			Incompetence (n=7615)			Role Restriction (n=7532)		
	ΔR^2	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	ΔR^2	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	ΔR^2	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Parental gender and Demographic variables	2,4%	27,00	0,000	0,3%	3,46	0,001	2,1%	22,93	0,000
RSQ dimensions	21,4%	724,56	0,000	16,9%	516,23	0,000	7,8%	217,29	0,000
Gender Effects	0,0%	0,98	0,401	0,0%	0,41	0,743	0,0%	1,16	0,322
Interaction Effects	0,4%	2,28	0,002	0,5%	2,60	0,000	0,3%	1,62	0,048
RSQ dimensions*2	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b*2</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Importance with Independence	0,07	13,40	0,000	0,04	5,35	0,000	0,13	13,53	0,000
Relationship-related Anxiety	0,20	38,96	0,000	0,23	36,30	0,000	0,18	20,49	0,000
Discomfort with Closeness	0,07	12,04	0,000	0,05	6,69	0,000	0,00	0,33	0,739
Interaction Effects*3									
Importance with Independence x Born outside Sweden	-0,09	-3,93	0,000	-0,10	-3,42	0,001			
Relationship-related Anxiety x Parental age				0,01	3,77	0,000			
Relationship-related Anxiety x Single parenting									
	Spouse Relationship Problems								
	Social Isolation (n=7669)			(n=7516)			Health Problems (n=7722)		
	ΔR^2	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	ΔR^2	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	ΔR^2	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>

Parental gender and Demographic variables	3,8%	43,55	0,000	13,5%	167,92	0,000	0,5%	5,21	0,000
RSQ dimensions	21,8%	746,98	0,000	7,3%	229,79	0,000	5,7%	155,89	0,000
Gender Effects	0,0%	1,39	0,244	0,0%	0,20	0,896	0,1%	1,50	0,214
Interaction Effects	0,5%	2,81	0,000	0,6%	2,93	0,000	0,2%	1,07	0,380
RSQ dimensions*²	<i>b*²</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b*²</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b*²</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Importance with Independence	0,07	9,83	0,000	0,09	9,35	0,000	0,06	7,15	0,000
Relationship-related Anxiety	0,20	31,71	0,000	0,17	20,01	0,000	0,16	19,09	0,000
Discomfort with Closeness	0,19	25,74	0,000	0,09	8,60	0,000	0,02	2,29	0,022
Interaction Effects*³									
Importance with Independence x Born outside Sweden				-0,16	-3,92	0,000			
Relationship-related Anxiety x Parental age									
Relationship-related Anxiety x Single parenting	0,12	4,50	0,000						

*¹ Step 1: Parental gender and demographic variables (parental age, education (3 categories giving 2 dummy variables), born outside Sweden, single parenting, number of children); Step 2: RSQ dimensions; Step 3: Interaction effects between parental gender and RSQ; Step: Interaction effects between Demographic variables and RSQ

*² Estimated *b* from regression with variables from step 1 and step 2 included.

*³ Only significant effects are reported. Estimated *b* from regression with variables in all 4 steps included.

Discussion

Reconstruction of RSQ

The Relationship Style Questionnaire was translated and successfully revised into three dimensions: Importance of Independence, Relationship-related Anxiety and Discomfort with Closeness. The same dimensions were valid for mothers as well as fathers. Our three factor-solution yielded a better measure for attachment styles in a Swedish sample of parents of toddlers, than the original two factors Model of Other and Model of Self. However, the goodness of fit-values suggest that further validation is needed.

Instruments for assessing attachment style have been based on either two (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994a; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992) or three (Collins & Read, 1990; Collins, 1996) factors. Currently, most studies would conclude that adult attachment can be modelled by the two dimensions anxiety and avoidance (e.g. Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000; Roisman et al., 2007). When looking at the wording of the SwRSQ-14 items, we have assumed that our anxiety dimension is comparable to anxiety in other instruments and that independence and discomfort with closeness are two aspects of avoidance. This interpretation is supported by the strong correlation observed between Model of Self and Relationship-related Anxiety on the one hand, and Model of Other and the two factors Importance of Independence and Discomfort with Closeness on the other hand. This also fits with how Collins and Read understand their three dimensions; Dependence, Anxiety and Closeness (Collins & Read, 1990; Collins, 1996) and suggests that our dimensions can be meaningfully understood and interpreted within the theory of adult attachment based on self-report. Furthermore, we would argue that the consistency of findings in two such divergent subpopulations as ours (parents of toddlers) and Collins and Read's American university students support the

modelling of adult attachment in the three dimensions described.

The difference in results between our results and previous validations in other kinds of samples (Bäckström & Holmes, 2001; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994b; Kurdek, 2002; Roisman et al., 2007; Stein et al., 2002) may depend either (1) on a true change of attachment orientation due to the transition to parenthood or (2) a change of the interpretation of the items when being a parent of a small child. There are several reasons why the interpretation might be the issue. First, in Swedish *depend on* can be understood both as (a) trust (Swedish: *tillit*) and (b) economically and/or psychologically dependent upon (Swedish: *vara beroende av*). The latter alternative may have a slight negative connotation due to a societal and political debate characterized by ideas of economic, social, and gender equality. In our translation of the RSQ we chose the second alternative (i.e. econ./psych. depend.), while Bäckström and Holms (2001) chose the first alternative (i.e. trust) in four of five items (the translations were carried out during the same time period, without being aware of each other's work).

Second, due to our translation, the interpretation of items concerning independence (item 1, 2, 10, 15, 22, 26) might be altered when being a parent to a toddler. This might be true in part because a child is fully dependent on his/her parents for survival and well-being, and because the parents might be more dependent on each other for practical and economic reasons than they had been and had been comfortable with. Hence, a temporary longing for independence may be present, resulting in higher scores on these items. Both the translation and the interpretation might be powerful reasons why avoidance was split into two distinct dimensions: independence and discomfort with closeness.

Associations with parenting stress

Complete scale of parenting stress

We found more relationship anxiety to be associated with more overall parenting stress, which is in line with prior research suggesting an association between anxiety and stress more generally (Collins, 1996; Fraley & Shaver 1998; Saisto et al., 2008). To our knowledge, the only two studies linking attachment styles and parenting stress have found associations between them (Rholes, Simpson, & Friedman, 2006; Vasquez, Durik, & Hyde, 2002). However, Vasquez et al. found fearful attachment to have the strongest association with parenting stress, Rholes et al. found avoidance to be strongest, and we found anxiety to be strongest. The seeming differences between the results can perhaps be understood by looking at the theoretical constructs model of other and model of self: Fearful attachment is seen as reflecting a *negative* model of other and a *negative* model of self, avoidant as a *negative* model of other and a *positive* model of self, and anxious as a *positive* model of other and *negative* model of self. Hence, our result combined with Rholes et al.'s result is in line with Vasquez et al.'s findings.

Rholes et al. also found a correlation between parenting stress and anxiety ($r = 0.28$) besides avoidance ($r = 0.33$). However, they conclude that particularly avoidantly attached individuals experience parenting stress after the birth of their first child (Rholes, Simpson, & Friedman, 2006), whereas we found weak associations between parenting stress and our two avoidant dimensions. Some design differences might account for the slight differences: they assessed attachment style just before birth of the first child and parenting stress 6 months later, whereas our assessments were carried out at the same time when the target child was 2-3 years of age and on average had one sibling.

The current study showed no differences between mothers and fathers concerning the associations between attachment styles and parenting stress, which is in line with previous findings (Rholes, Simpson, & Friedman, 2006).

Subscales of parenting stress

Two of the five sub-scales of parenting stress – Incompetence and Social Isolation – showed a substantially stronger (higher R^2) association with adult attachment. Parents who were more anxious concerning their relationships experienced a greater feeling of incompetence in their parenting as well as more social isolation as a consequence of parenting. More social isolation was also reported by parents who felt more discomfort with closeness.

Anxious attachment is often characterized by the self being seen as unlovable and unworthy (Collins & Read, 1990; Collins, 1996; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994a; Ravitz et al., 2010). The association between relationship-related anxiety and perceived incompetence can perhaps be understood through the negative view of the self giving rise to a critical attitude towards one's own parenting. Our finding concerning attachment and social isolation was expected in the light of several studies: individuals classified as avoidant tend to seek less support than securely attached individuals (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Fraley & Shaver, 1998; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992; Simpson et al., 2002), while individuals classified as preoccupied seek but cannot benefit from intimate social support (Moreira et al., 2003). Not being able to seek or benefit from close emotional support is likely to induce a feeling of social isolation. Furthermore, Östberg and Hagekull (2000) reported that social support is one of the most important predictors for parenting stress, especially for Social Isolation and hence our findings were expected. The attachment dimension regarding independence did not show any strong associations with the subscales of parenting stress, which might be a consequence of the translation and interpretation process (discussed above).

Strength and limitations

The major strengths of the present study are the large sample and the inclusion of fathers. However, as a consequence of the lack of instructions concerning which of the parents was to answer the questionnaire, our sample consists of only 3% fathers. Since the selection of fathers is unlikely to be random, it is not recommended that our findings be generalized concerning fathers to the general population. The cross-sectional design does not allow causal inferences to be made..

Further, we argue that the somewhat skewed dropout regarding demographics probably did not affect our main findings. However, a skewed dropout regarding adult attachment or parenting stress might have influenced the results and it was not possible, to analyse such a drop out. Nevertheless, we are likely to have included a heterogeneous group of parents as the sample size is large and drawn from the general population.

Conclusions

Our revision of the Relationship Scales Questionnaire in a population-based sample of parents of toddlers resulted in three dimensions of adult attachment, regardless of parental gender: Importance of Independence, Relationship-related Anxiety, and Discomfort with Closeness. The agreement with previous findings in other study populations suggests that they constitute substantial and meaningful dimensions. Attachment anxiety seems to be of importance for the perception of parenting stress, especially concerning feelings of incompetence and social isolation. Discomfort with closeness also seems to be of significance in relation to social isolation. However, we did not find any evidence that attachment-related independence is of major importance for parenting stress.

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