

Attachment and Psychopathological Risk in Students Attending an Italian University

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Abstract

Considering psychological processes together with attachment styles could be appropriated to deepen the causes of students' difficulties, in order to promote adaptive paths. This study aims to identify resources and vulnerabilities of 204 students (mean age = 40.32; s.d. = 6.81) attending an Italian University and to examine their psycho-pathological risk and attachment style. Students showed heterogeneous emotional-adaptive profile and symptoms, with different attachment styles. They also showed different academic result based on specific attachment styles. Our results suggest that individual emotional and behavioral self-regulation and attachment has to be taken into account in prevention and intervention programs focused on students.

Keywords: *Counselling; Psychological Functioning; Attachment*

Background and Introduction

Over the last 20 years, Bowlby's [1] attachment theory has become one of the leading theoretical frameworks for the study of emotion regulation, personality development and interpersonal relationships [2]. Adult attachment research suggests that individuals develop attachment representations that are relationship-specific, leading subjects to hold distinct working models in different relationships [3,4]. From this perspective, assessing individual differences in attachment within and across a variety of relational contexts becomes relevant because adults express their own adaptive functioning in relation to extrinsic and intrinsic processes that are responsible for monitoring, evaluating and modifying emotional reactions. Moreover, descriptions of people's functioning can provide profiles that highlight crucial information that could, in turn, be helpful for self-orientation, a path within environmental opportunities or constraints taken to achieve a satisfactory individual goal.

The attachment styles, together with psychological functioning, are believed to play an important role in the way people live in and understand their social world. These aspects influence people's attitudes across an array of relational contexts, including relationships with parents, friends, romantic partners, and fellow students. As such, assessing these elements is crucial for understanding personality dynamics, emotions and interpersonal relationships. Assessing the students' experiences in close relationships, in general, and individual differences in emotional and behavioral functioning can lead to a focus on a specific target group of students attending Universities, in order to prevent academic abandonments and to promote adaptive paths [5-7].

Objectives

The purpose of this study was to evaluate psychological and behavioral functioning in students attending an Italian university, and to examine their attachment style within and across a variety of relational contexts. In particular, we intended to assess different emotional

and behavioral functioning based on attachment style and to verify whether attachment style can influence the results of their academic careers. In sum, we aimed to identify the resources and the vulnerabilities of the students, tracing their emotional-adaptive profile and evaluating which aspects of possible psychopathologic risk typified these students.

Methods

Subjects and Procedure

The sample was composed of $N = 204$ students (52.5% females) who were contacted at the start of the academic year and asked to participate in a research project. The average age of the sample was 40.32 (s.d. = 6.81). After agreeing to participate in the study, the following self-report instruments were administered.

At the end of the academic year, the students were asked to fill in a form indicating the number of exams they had taken during the year and their average grades.

In line with the Declaration of Helsinki (DoH), prior to the beginning of the study, the Ethical Committee approved the research plan. Every participant signed an informed consent, and privacy of personal data and results were guaranteed to all students.

Tools

The Adult Self-Report (ASR) [8,9] is a self-report questionnaire with dimensional classifications that estimate emotional and behavioral problems and competences. It consists of 132 clinic items with a three-step answer (0 “not true”; 1 “partially or sometimes true”; 2 “very true or often true”). The instrument targets problems connected with internalizing and externalizing problems. The internalization problems include behavioral, emotional and social problems, such being Withdrawn, Somatic Complaints and Anxiety/Depression. Externalization refers to a tendency to express problems outwardly, with Aggressive Behaviors and Rule-breaking Behaviors. The other problems take place between two dimensions, and they are Thought Problems, Attention Problems and Intrusive Thoughts.

The Experiences in Close Relationships - Relationship Structures Questionnaire (ECR-RS) [10] is a self-report measure of attachment, which allows assessment of attachment-related anxiety and avoidance in four different domains: with mother, father, friends and romantic partners. It contains nine items selected from the well-established Experiences in Close Relationships - Revised questionnaire (ECR-R) [11]. The same nine items were used in each of the four domains. For each item, participants were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the item (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). ECR-RS, in the Italian context [12], has shown good reliability (Cronbach's alpha .82 for avoidance and .83 for anxiety). For each interpersonal relationship, respectively: Avoidance (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84; .80; .81$); Anxiety (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77; .84; .79$). Four attachment styles have been obtained: Secure, Preoccupied, Fearful-avoidant and Dismissing-avoidant.

Data Analysis

To examine the emotional and behavioral profiles of the students (ASR) while considering their attachment styles (ECR-RS), we carried out multivariate analyses of variances (MANOVA) taking into account the effects of age and gender. In all MANOVA, univariate analyses were then conducted on significant effects, and Bonferroni's test was used for contrasts.

Moreover, we carried out analyses of variances (ANOVA) to verify whether students with different attachment styles had achieved different academic results at the end of the academic year. In all the analyses we conducted, the students' ages and sexes showed no significant effect on the variables.

All analyses were performed with SPSS software (Version 22.0).

Results

Based on the attachment styles, we divided sample into four groups. Table 1 describes the groups' characteristics (Table 1).

SEC (Group A)	33 students	41 students	74 students
PREOC (Group B)	49 students	57 students	106 students
FEAR (Group C)	4 students	5 students	9 students
DIS (Group D)	11 students	4 students	15 students

Table 1: Sample divided on the basis of attachment style.

Note: SEC: Secure Attachment Style; PREOC: Preoccupied Attachment Style; FEAR: Fearful Avoidant Attachment Style; DIS: Dismissing Avoidant Attachment Style

Emotional and behavioral profiles

To verify whether students who have different attachment styles show specific emotional-behavioral functioning, a MANOVA was conducted on the four groups' scores on all subscales of ASR, and it showed a group effect ($\Lambda = .001$; $F(256,818) = 4.198$; $p < 0.001$). Table 2 shows mean scores, standard deviations, and F and p values. Moreover, Figure 1 shows the emotional-adaptive profile between UITU students with different attachment styles.

Results showed that Group B has high scores at ASR subscales of Aggressive Behaviors (Bonferroni post-hoc test; $p < 0.001$) and Thought Problems (Bonferroni post-hoc test; $p < 0.001$). Group C showed higher scores on ASR subscales of Withdrawn (Bonferroni post-hoc test; $p < 0.001$) and Anxious-Depressed (Bonferroni post-hoc test; $p < 0.001$). Group D showed higher scores on ASR subscales of Somatic Complaints (Bonferroni post-hoc test; $p < 0.001$) and Intrusive Thoughts (Bonferroni post-hoc test; $p < 0.001$) (Table 2 and Figure 1).

	Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	F	P Values
RULE_B	0,28 (0,29)	0,47 (1,12)	0,3 (0,47)	0,51 (0,55)	0,35	ns
AGG	0,45 (0,26)	6,36 (0,43)*	0,37 (0,32)	0,43 (0,29)	50,19	< 0,001
WIT	0,57 (0,35)	0,7 (0,41)	2,79 (0,53)*	0,75 (0,33)	4,39	< 0,001
SOM_C	0,39 (0,37)	0,41 (0,36)	0,46 (0,28)	1,76 (0,39)**	2,13	< 0,01
ANX_DEP	0,45 (0,32)	0,5 (0,35)	3,42 (0,41)*	0,5 (0,36)	8,34	< 0,001
THOU_P	0,36 (0,34)	6,35 (0,45)*	0,19 (0,36)	0,32 (0,34)	39,23	< 0,001
ATT_P	0,63 (0,33)	0,7 (0,35)	0,8 (0,31)	0,65 (0,32)	1,41	ns
INTR	0,55 (0,33)	0,47 (0,32)	0,37 (0,16)	1,97 (0,46)*	2,71	< 0,001

Table 2: Mean scores, standard deviations and F and p values.

Note: RULE_B: Rule Breaking Behaviors; AGG: Aggressive Behaviors; WIT: Withdrawn; SOM_C: Somatic Complaints; ANX_DEP: Anxious/Depressed; THOU_P: Thought Problems; ATT_P: Attention Problems; INTR: Intrusive thoughts.

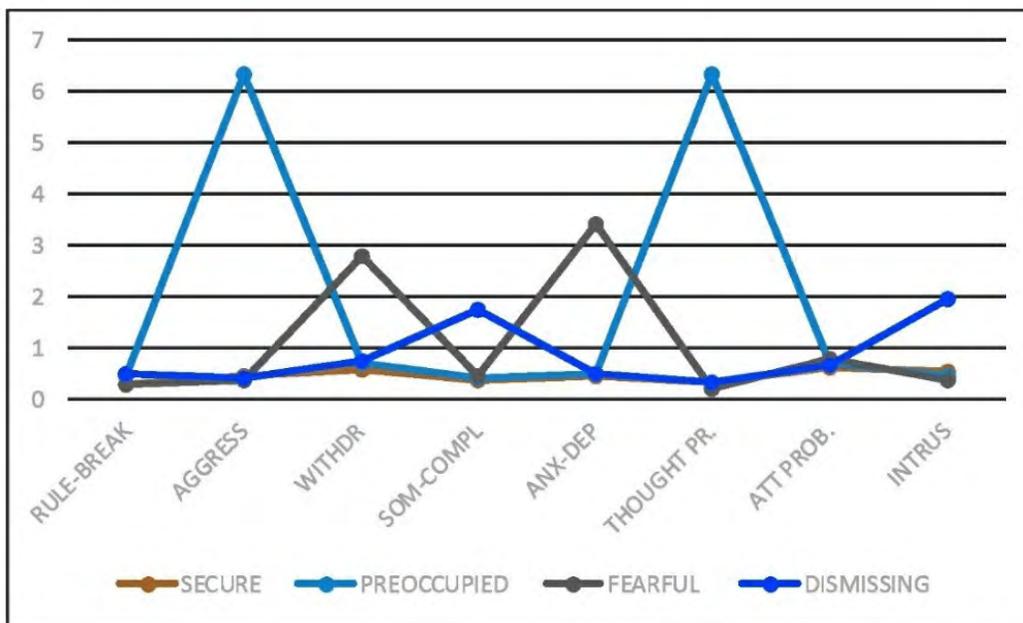


Figure 1: Comparison of UITU students with different attachment styles.

Academic career

ANOVAs were conducted to verify if students with different attachment styles had diverse academic results at the end of the academic year. Table 3 shows mean scores, standard deviations and F and p values. Results showed that students with dismissive attachment styles have significantly higher average grades compared to their fellow students with fearful attachment styles (Bonferroni post-hoc test; p < 0.05). In terms of the number of exams taken, students with secure attachment styles have taken significantly more exams than students with preoccupied attachment styles (Bonferroni post-hoc test; p < 0.001) and than students with fearful attachment styles (Bonferroni post-hoc test; p < 0.05). Moreover, students with dismissive attachment style have taken more exams than students with preoccupied attachment styles (Bonferroni post-hoc test; p < 0.01) and than students with fearful attachment styles (Bonferroni post-hoc test; p < 0.05) (Table 3).

N_Exams	2,84 (0,16)	1,92 (0,13)	1,56 (0,45)	3,2 (0,35)	9,81	< 0,001
Average	23,42 (0,92)	24,82 (0,77)	17,78 (2,65)	27,07 (2,06)	3,05	< 0,05

Table 3: Mean scores, standard deviations, F and p values.

Note. N_Exams: Number of Exams Taken by Students; Average: Average of the Grades

Discussion

The present study examined if and how the emotional and behavioral profiles of the students attending an Italian university were associated with attachment styles and with different academic results.

First, by examining attachment in our sample, we found that the attachment styles spreads out in different groups, showing more cases of preoccupied attachment style in both genders. Second, we sought to examine emotional adaptive profiles in our sample to verify

whether students who have different attachment styles show specific emotional-behavioral functioning. Our analyses reveal some specific maladaptive areas in the psychological process of the students. In particular, students with preoccupied attachment styles have emotional-behavioral profiles specifically maladaptive as regards the area of externalizing (aggressive behaviors) and internalizing problems (thought problems). In contrast, students who have fearful-avoidant attachment show symptoms associated with being withdrawn and anxious/depressed. This finding suggests that these students demonstrate particularly risky profiles. These psychological processes and styles of attachment can be explored in relation to the performance in university fields.

We wanted to understand the influence of different attachment styles on academic careers, and our results indicate that secure attachment style is like a “facilitator” factor for academic careers (in term of number of exams and average scores), even if students with dismissive-avoidant attachment styles have the highest average grades.

Conclusions

This work considers the individual and relational characteristics of the students of an Italian university, highlighting the relationship between psychological profiles and attachment styles. Our results point to the relevance of different emotional and behavioral profiles based on attachment styles in students’ attitudes to their university careers, being a very important step in one’s life. We know that difficulties in emotional regulation from early childhood are possible precursors of maladaptive emotional functioning in adulthood [13-16]. Emotional-behavioral functioning is also associated with risky behaviors, and researchers have suggested that this time of life represents a crucial moment in the development of the psychopathology [17].

The study has several strengths. First, well-validated and widely used measures were employed. Furthermore, our research considers psychological functioning, associating it to attachment styles, and verifies the possible link to academic performances, which may stimulate further clinical studies with larger sample sizes. However, we must note that psychological and attachment measurements should be considered as an evolutionary process [10].

Our study has some limitations. A control sample was not recruited, so it was not possible to compare subjects’ scores to another group. Another potential limitation is that the present study was not designed as longitudinal research, which would offer important information on the stability of and changes in subjects’ psychological functioning.

Our study suggests that individual emotional and behavioral self-regulations have to be taken into account together with attachment style. Our findings propose the importance of evaluating students’ profiles during the first years after their enrolling, in order to better catch on individual needs, difficulties and demands, to possibly propose intervention programs. In fact, we think that this type of approach can help students to take up their careers in optimal ways, in order to redefine the meaning of past critical emotional experiences, whilst being potentially transformative meetings finalized to enhance self-knowledge [18,19]. Consistently with this standpoint, it must be stressed that in the last ten years the demand from students for university mental health services has greatly increased [20,21]. We therefore believe that it is increasingly important for universities to activate and offer mental health centers that are particularly focused on students’ psychological profiles and academic performances. In particular, considering that during recent years the number of students enrolled in distance learning universities has increased the importance of creating programs of evaluation and intervention on their psychological statuses is undeniable.

In closing, we hope this research will help advance the study of adult psychological functioning and will add to the literature by providing a short and useful method for assessing individual differences in emotional and behavioral functioning and then the right support programs.

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