



Is There a Relationship Between ADHD and Attachment Insecurity?

Kristene Cheung & Jennifer Theule
Department of Psychology, University of Manitoba

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

- A neurodevelopmental disorder.
- Symptoms are characterized by inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).
- Causes of the disorder have not yet been fully determined.
 - Biological explanations are currently predominant in the etiological literature (Lahat et al., 2011; Masuo et al., 2012; Stergiakouli et al. 2012).
- Research has begun to investigate potential psychosocial contributions to the disorder (e.g., Halasz & Vance, 2002).
- Environmental factors can influence atypical development (Clarke et al., 2002; Sonuga-Barke & Balding, 1993).

Attachment Styles

- Mary Ainsworth studied the quality of parent-child attachment relationships (e.g., Finzi-Dottan et al., 2006; Labauve, 2003).
- Categorized behavior into 2 broadly labeled groups
 1. Secure attachment
 2. Insecure attachment

ADHD and Attachment Styles

- Speculation that ADHD symptoms strongly correspond with insecure attachment styles (Clarke et al., 2002; Rochford, 2005).
- ADHD as a diagnosis cannot exist as a separate entity from a child's attachment type (Erdman, 1998).

Objective

To determine a possible relationship between ADHD and insecure attachment style.

Research Questions

1. To what extent is ADHD and insecure attachment related?
2. Are individuals with ADHD more likely to have an insecure attachment in comparison to individuals without ADHD?
3. Is there a difference in attachment insecurity between the subtypes of ADHD (Inattentive Type, Hyperactivity-Impulsive Type, Combined Type)?
4. What are the odds of an individual with ADHD having an insecure attachment compared to individuals without?
5. Do individuals with co-occurring conduct problems have a higher rating of insecure attachment?

Method

- A meta-analysis was conducted

Literature search
Database: PsycINFO, Medline, ERIC, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, Google Scholar

Limits: English-language articles only

Search results combined (n = 155)

Articles screened on basis of title and abstract

Excluded (n = 114)

- Not an eligible population: 47
- Qualitative study: 24
- No direct measure of attachment: 19
- Did not meet criteria for attachment style: 4
- Multiple publications: 20

Included (n = 41)

Manuscript review and application of inclusion criteria

Excluded (n = 23)

- Not an eligible population: 4
- Qualitative study: 5
- No direct measure of attachment: 7
- Did not meet criteria for attachment style: 2
- Full text not available: 2
- Not an eligible comparison of outcomes presented: 3

Included (n = 18)

- 18 studies met criteria for inclusion
 - Included 8 published and 10 unpublished reports
 - Year of publication ranged from 1999 to 2012
- Number of participants
 - Total (n = 1,934)
 - With ADHD (n = 1,086)
 - Without ADHD (n = 848)
- Each study was coded following a coding manual
- Data was entered and analyzed through Comprehensive Meta Analysis program (CMA)
 - An array of effects were determined

Results

1. Based on seven different effect sizes, there was a moderate relationship between ADHD and insecure attachment ($r = 0.37$).
2. Seven different effect sizes established that the overall effect size for the relationship between ADHD and insecure attachment compared to individuals without ADHD was medium ($d = 0.52$).
3. For the comparison between Hyperactivity-Impulsive/Combined subtype of ADHD and Inattentive subtypes the effect was medium based on one effect size ($d = 0.57$).
4. Based on three effect sizes, individuals with ADHD have 5.64 times the odds as individuals without ADHD of having an insecure attachment.
5. Two effect sizes indicated that individuals with co-occurring conduct problems have 1.91 times the odds as individuals with ADHD only of having a higher rating of insecure attachment.

Discussion

- Majority of the studies included were unpublished reports.
- The evidence supports a connection between an insecure attachment and ADHD symptoms.
- Individuals with ADHD are much more likely to have an insecure attachment compared to individuals without ADHD.
- Individuals with co-occurring conduct problems are also more likely to have an insecure attachment compared to individuals with only ADHD.
- This result may suggest implementing a stronger emphasis on attachment-focused therapies to treat this population.
- Directions for future research
 - Explore possible differences in attachment insecurity between ADHD subtypes.

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed., text rev.). Washington, DC.
- Clarke, L., Ungerer, J., Chahoud, K., Johnson, S., & Stiefel, I. (2002). Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is associated with attachment insecurity. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 7(2), 179-198.
- Erdman, P. (1998). Conceptualizing ADHD as a contextual response to parental attachment. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 26(2), 177-185.
- Finzi-Dottan, R., Manor, I., & Tyano, S. (2006). ADHD, temperament, and parental style as predictors of the child's attachment patterns. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 37(2), 103-114.
- Halasz, G., & Vance, A. L. (2002). Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children: moving forward with divergent perspectives. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 177(10), 554-557.
- Labauve, B. J. (2003). Systemic treatment of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 22(2), 45-55.
- Lahat, E., Heyman, E., Livne, A., Goldman, M., Berkovitch, M., & Zachor, D. (2011). Iron deficiency in children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. *The Israel Medical Association Journal: IMAJ*, 13(9), 530-533.
- Masuo, Y., Shibata, J., & Rakwa, R. (2011). ADHD animal model characterization: a transcriptomics and proteomics analysis. *Methods in Molecular Biology*, 829, 505-530.
- Rochford, L. G. (2005). *Attending to attachment: The relation between attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity disorder and mother-child attachment in early childhood*. [Ph.D., The University of North Carolina at Greensboro]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (UMI: 305394439).
- Sonuga-Barke, E. J., & Balding, J. (1993). British parents' beliefs about the causes of three forms of childhood psychological disturbance. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 21(4), 367-376.
- Stergiakouli et al. (2012). Investigating the contribution of common genetic variants to the risk and pathogenesis of ADHD. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 169(2), 186-194.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by the Psychology Undergraduate Research Experience (PURE) Award from the Department of Psychology at the University of Manitoba.

Correspondence

Kristene.Cheung@umanitoba.ca or Jen.Theule@umanitoba.ca