

How do Lithuanian children talk about emotions during Child Attachment Interview?



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Background

Recent years have witnessed a growth in the study of attachment in middle childhood (Briumariu, Kerns, & Seibert, 2012, Fox & Borelli, 2015) with increasing number of studies adopting narrative based methods in the assessment of attachment representations (Kris, Steele, & Steele, 2012, Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008).

Whilst attachment is a universal phenomenon, relatively little is known about the expression of attachment in different cultures at different developmental stages. The potential influence of culture on the expression of attachment in middle childhood has rarely been investigated with most of the research conducted in Western cultures. More specifically, very few studies have emerged from Post-soviet countries where cultural traumas might still have an impact on both individuals and the family system (Gailiene, 2015).

Importantly, the ability to communicate emotions and thoughts is central to the formation of attachment bonds and to the construction of attachment narratives that are thought to reflect internal representations. Traditionally, communication about emotions has not been a big part of everyday family conversations in Lithuania.

Aim

In this context, our study aims to shed light on how Lithuanian children speak about their own and others' emotions when asked about attachment relationships and experiences.

Method

Participants

Participants were 117 children aged 7-11 (M = 8.51, SD = .997), 61 boy and 56 girls. Children were recruited through different schools in Lithuania.

Measures

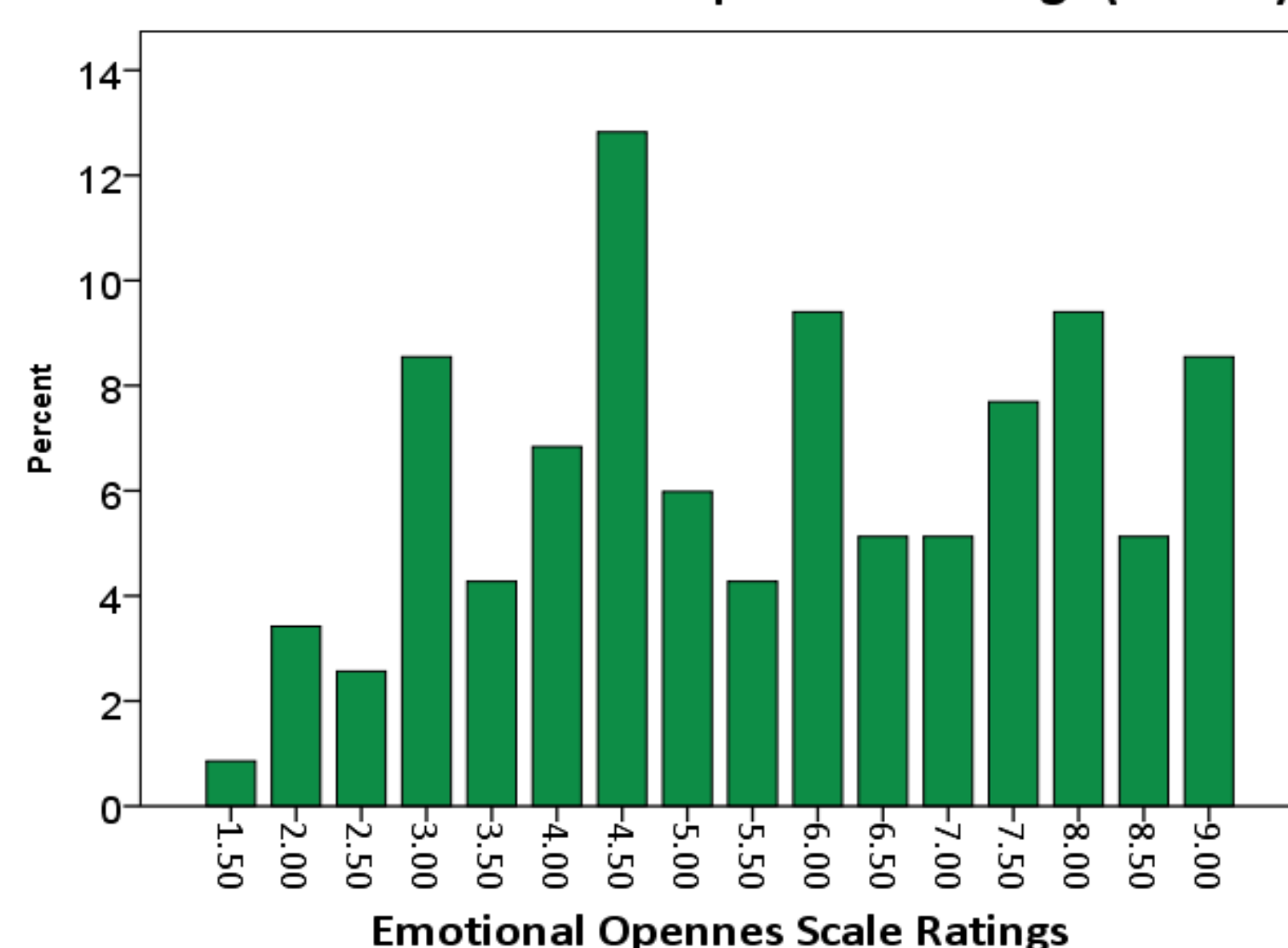
Child Attachment Interview (CAI, (Shmueli-Goetz, Target, Fonagy, & Datta, 2008) is a semistructured interview, in which children are invited to describe their relationships with their primary caregivers. CAI contains 19 questions asking children to recall and describe their attachment experiences with, and perception of their attachment figures, in particular, at times of hurt, emotional upset, illness, separation and loss.

CAI consists of 9 scales, one of the scales is **Emotional openness scale** on which the child's ability to express and label emotions, and to ground them in descriptions of interactions with attachment figures is assessed.

Results

Emotional openness scale

Distribution of Emotional Openness Ratings (N=117)



The scores of Emotional Openness scale of CAI ranged from 1.5 to 9 (M = 5.73, SD = 2.09).

Results

Distribution of attachment classifications

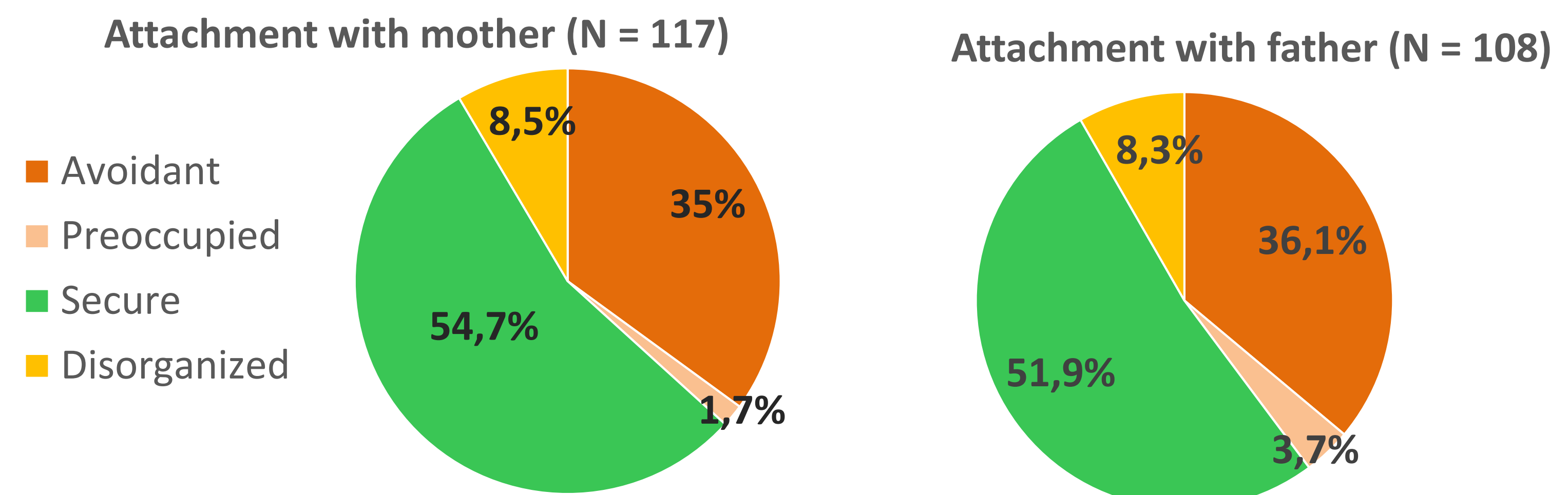


Fig. 1. Distribution of attachment classifications with both parents.

Main Findings

Labelling of emotions

Children differed in variety of emotions labeled in narratives.

How did you feel when you were playing? I don't know. how do you think your mother felt? I don't know. Good.. 10209
It was fun... Aa, how to explain. Was smiling. 12113

..I was a little bit scared at first but then I quickly started feeling calmer.. And was not afraid. 10210
...We were angry. Well, I guess I was guilty, it was not pleasant.. Maybe my brother was guilty somewhat, I was guilty and mother was disappointed. 17210

Strong tendency to use the words "good", "bad", "normal", "(un)pleasantly" when talking about emotions was observed in many interviews. This was also evident in narratives with rather wide range of emotion words.

The **most common emotions** mentioned in interviews were "angry", "happy" and "sad".

Some children gave answers about **actions or thoughts instead of emotions**.

„I turn away and go to do something.“ 16306

„I was thinking that I didn't really lie to my mum.. My sister she does that... Lie, others do that.“ 10319

Talking about emotions spontaneously vs. after prompting

In smaller part of the interviews children **spontaneously** talked about emotions before the questions about emotions.
In those instances: mostly labeling emotions, some descriptions of situations, less reasons for emotions.

In considerable part of the interviews children talked about emotions, gave more elaborate descriptions of emotions and their context **after prompting**.

Complexity of description of emotional experience

- Labeling of emotions was the most common response.
- Some children in addition to labeling provided descriptions of situations where emotions were experienced.

„I felt upset when she got angry with me. She was explaining that I had to remember to do that...“

- Explanations of reasons behind emotions and description of impact of emotions were less common in the interviews.

„she is sad because we don't behave with each other nicely. We fight with sister and mom is sad.. I think. Because we her children and she doesn't like us fight“ 16104
“...angry that he thought that way!“ 10319

Discussion

Whilst Lithuanian children differed in how they talk about emotions during interview about their attachment figures and attachment relationships, some common tendencies were observed in most of the interviews. These initial findings draw attention to the importance of having in mind the cultural environment of the child when assessing attachment representations with narrative based measures developed in Western cultures (e.g. US, UK). In this context further cross-cultural studies are needed in order to elucidate deeper understanding and to ensure adequate measurement of attachment across cultures in middle childhood.

Acknowledgements

The study was funded by a grant (No. MIP-016/2012) from the Research Council of Lithuania.



24th Biennial Meeting of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development
July 10-14, 2016 | Vilnius, Lithuania

