Culture and Adversity: An Exploratory Study of Attachment Representations in Fostered Lithuanian Children

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Background and Aims

Attachment in middle childhood has been the focus of considerable research in the last decade (Röder et al., 2014) with the impact of separation from biological parents on the quality of subsequent attachment relationships receiving greater attention (see for example, Zaccagnino et al., 2014).

Although attachment is a universal phenomenon, relatively little is known about the expression of attachment in different cultures beyond infancy and early childhood. Critically, the ability to communicate emotions and thoughts is central to the formation of attachment bonds and to the expression of attachment representations through narratives. In this process, caregivers’ reflective functioning might play an important role as well. Little is known about attachment expression in Lithuanian culture, where, traditionally, communication about emotions in families has not been the focus.

This current study explores how fostered children with early adversity experience talk about their attachment relationships. It represents a first attempt to study attachment in middle childhood in Lithuanian sample by eliciting attachment-related narratives. The study aims to shed light on the ways in which attachment might be manifest in Lithuanian culture, in children with adverse life experiences.

Sample

Participants were 12 children, aged 8-10 years old, (9 girls, 3 boys) living in diverse foster care arrangements and their foster mothers. Eight children were living in household type foster care homes, two children in foster care families, and a further two children were adopted.

Measures

Attachment

Children completed the Child Attachment Interview (CAI; Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008), a well validated narrative based assessment of attachment in middle childhood. The CAI was established as a reliable and valid attachment measure with Lithuanian children in a separate validation study (N=119, Gervinskaite-Paulaitiene, Grausliene, & Barkauskiene, 2015). Reflective functioning (RF)

Foster mothers completed the Parent Development Interview (PDI; Stade, et al., 2003), which was used to code RF.

Results

Table 1. Attachment classifications with foster and biological parents (n)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment classification</th>
<th>Secure</th>
<th>Anxious</th>
<th>Avoidant</th>
<th>Disorganized</th>
<th>Disengaged</th>
<th>No applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foster mother</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster father</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological mother</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological father</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RF and cohereance of attachment representations

Caregivers RF (M=4.73, SD=1.1) and children’s CAI coherence (M=4.63, SD=2.54) was not significantly related (r = 0.214, p<0.05).

Discussion

Whilst Lithuanian fostered children differed in their attachment security and on important attachment dimensions, some common tendencies were observed in most of the interviews. The findings can be seen in light of early adverse experiences and in context of Lithuanian culture. Lithuania has experienced important social transformations over past two and a half decades (Gailiene, 2015). Furthermore, it seems that for a long time talking about internal experiences was not very frequent in everyday life in Lithuania. This context can be referred to the nature of child rearing practices, the quality of conversations in families and with development and expression of attachment representations.

This exploratory study represents a unique first attempt to study attachment representation of school aged fostered children in Lithuania. Although the findings are limited in scope, we hope to extend the study and shed further light on attachment and the impact of adversity and culture on its expression in middle childhood.

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