

The relationship between early adverse experiences and social anxiety in adolescence: The mediator role of fears of compassion

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INTRODUCTION

Several studies show that recalling of early adverse experiences with parents contribute to higher levels of psychopathology. Furthermore, negative emotional experiences during childhood may lead individuals to resist or be fearful of experiencing compassion for themselves, from others and of having compassionate feelings for others. These difficulties in experiencing affiliative emotions have been related to mental health problems.

OBJECTIVES

Explore whether difficulties in receiving affiliative soothing emotions from self and from others (fears of compassion) mediate the impact of adverse memories (early experiences of threat, submissiveness, unvalued) on social anxiety symptoms in adolescents.

METHOD

Participants

The sample included 309 adolescents (58.3% males; 41.7% females) aged between 12 and 19 years old (M = 14.91, SD = 2.12). These adolescents showed a mean of 9 years of education (SD = 1.73).

Measures

Early Life Experiences Scale (ELES; Gilbert et al., 2003) assess personal feelings of threat, subordination and unvalued in early interactions with significant figures. This scale comprises 15 items and three subscales: (i) Threat (6 items), which assess the recall of perceived threats in childhood; (ii) Submissiveness (6 items), which taps feelings of subordination and submissive behaviours; and (iii) (Un)valued (3 items, reversed), which include positive items about feeling equal and relaxed in the family. Responses are rated on a 5-point scale, with higher scores indicating greater feelings of threat, subordination and unvalued, respectively.

Fears of Compassion Scales (FCS; Gilbert et al., 2010) comprises three scales, which assess fears of compassionate feelings and behaviors from others (15 items), for others (13 items) and for self (17 items). The items are rated on a 5-point scale, with higher scores representing greater levels of fears of compassion from others, for others and for self, respectively.

Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (SAS-A; La Greco & Lopez, 1998) is a 22-item scale with three subscales. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale, with higher scores representing greater social anxiety. In the current study the total score was used.

RESULTS

1. Sex differences for variables in study

Table 1
Means (M), standard deviations (SD), independent samples t-test for sex differences and Cronbach's alphas for all variables in study.

Variables	Total sample (N = 309) M (SD)	Boys (n = 180) M (SD)	Girls (n = 129) M (SD)	t (df)	alpha
Threat	2.01 (0.82)	2.02 (0.78)	1.99 (0.87)	0.301 (307)	.81
Submissiveness	2.26 (0.76)	2.20 (0.75)	2.34 (0.79)	1.665 (307)	.77
Unvalued	2.24 (0.94)	2.09 (0.91)	2.44 (0.96)	3.161 (307)**	.75
FCforOthers	23.12 (7.96)	22.51 (7.87)	23.98 (8.03)	1.606 (307)	.81
FCfromOthers	18.35 (10.42)	18.07 (10.54)	18.74 (10.29)	0.563 (307)	.86
FCforSelf	18.68 (13.08)	19.74 (13.69)	17.20 (12.10)	1.686 (307)	.92
Social Anxiety	68.68 (15.75)	66.83 (16.14)	71.26 (14.89)	2.452 (307)*	.91

Note. *p<.05, **p<.01.

RESULTS

2. Correlation Analyses

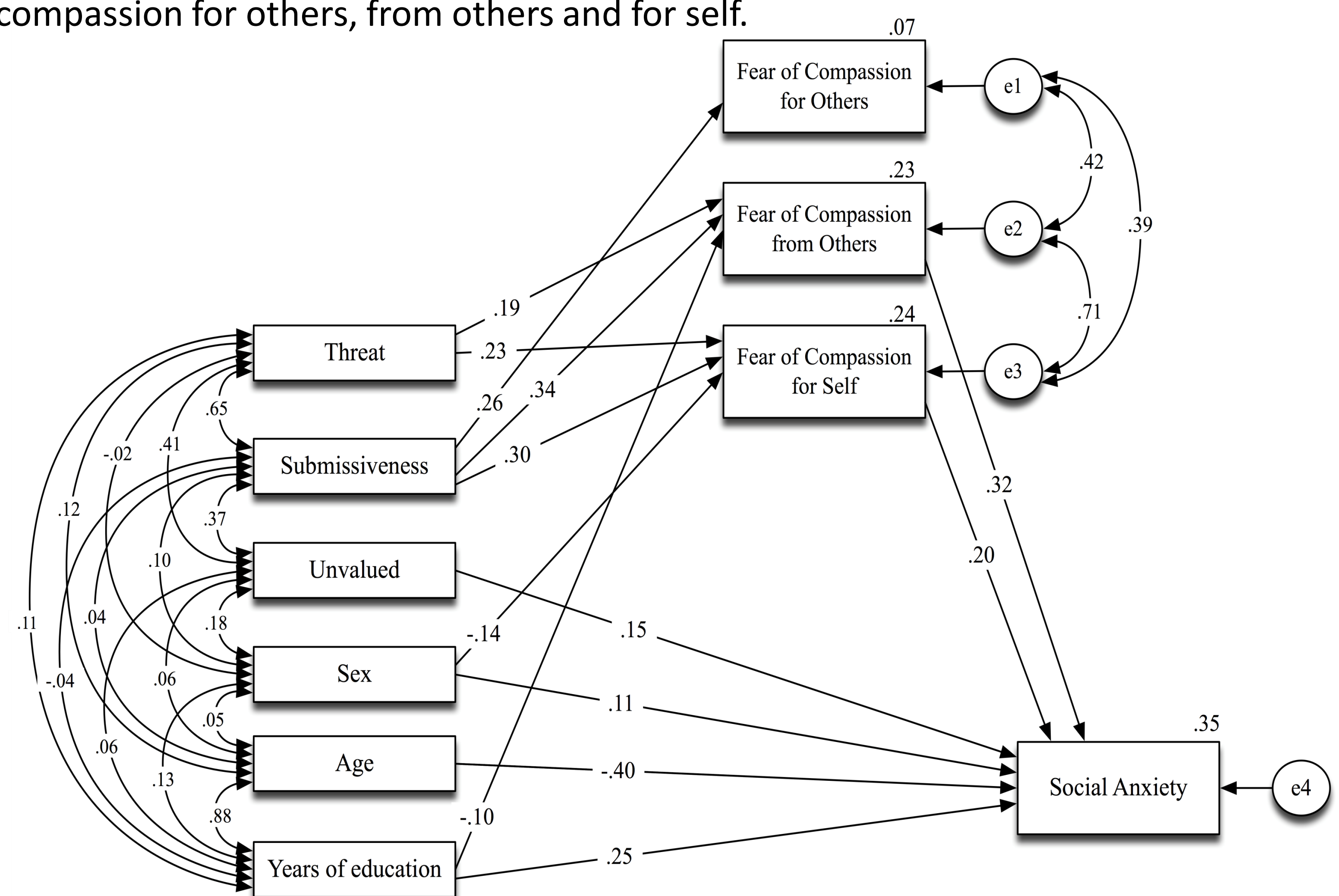
Table 1
Correlations between all variables in study (N = 309)

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1.Age	-							
2.Years Education	.88***	-						
3.Threat	.13*	.11*	-					
4.Submissiveness	ns	ns	.65***	-				
5.Unvalued	ns	ns	.41***	.37***	-			
6.FCforOthers	ns	ns	.11*	.26***	ns	-		
7. FCfromOthers	ns	-.12*	.37***	.45***	.17**	.46***	-	
8.FCforSelf	ns	ns	.41***	.43***	.18***	.42***	.76***	-
9.Social Anxiety	-.21***	-.13*	.23***	.31***	.25***	.23***	.51***	.47***

Note. *p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01, ***p ≤ .001. ns = non-significant.

3. Path Analysis

A path analysis was performed to test the mediation effect of fears of compassion in the relationship between early life experiences (threat, submissiveness and unvalued) and social anxiety. Demographic variables were included in the model to control their effect. The model explain 35% of the total variance of social anxiety. The non-significant paths were removed and the figure drawn below displays paths statistically significant (p < .001). Unvalued feelings had a direct effect on social anxiety. The Bootstrap analysis showed that there was an indirect effect of threat on social anxiety through fear of compassion from others and fear of compassion for self. There was an indirect effect of submissiveness on social anxiety through fears of compassion for others, from others and for self.



DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Results indicate that adolescents who recall unvalued feelings in early interactions with parents tend to report higher levels of social anxiety. Moreover, adolescents who come from threatening and submissiveness early environments tend to report more fears of receiving compassionate feelings from others and more fears of self-compassion which in turn impact on social anxiety. These findings emphasize **the role of fears of compassion** from others and for self on how early threatening and submissiveness experiences impact on social anxiety. Therefore, in terms of clinical implications, these data suggest that **compassion abilities are particularly relevant to develop among adolescents** with increased social anxiety as a way of reducing the damaging impact of early negative experiences.

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