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 unvaluation 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. Correlations between variables in study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Total sample (N = 309)</th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
<th>Boys (N = 180)</th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
<th>Girls (N = 129)</th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
<th>t (df)</th>
<th>alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>2.01 (0.82)</td>
<td>2.02 (0.78)</td>
<td>1.99 (0.87)</td>
<td>0.301 (307)</td>
<td>0.81</td>
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<tr>
<td>Submissiveness</td>
<td>2.26 (0.76)</td>
<td>2.20 (0.75)</td>
<td>2.34 (0.79)</td>
<td>1.665 (307)</td>
<td>0.77</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unvalued</td>
<td>2.24 (0.94)</td>
<td>2.09 (0.91)</td>
<td>2.44 (0.96)</td>
<td>3.361 (307)**</td>
<td>0.75</td>
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<tr>
<td>FComFromOthers</td>
<td>23.32 (7.96)</td>
<td>22.51 (7.87)</td>
<td>23.98 (8.03)</td>
<td>1.606 (307)</td>
<td>0.81</td>
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<tr>
<td>FComFromSelf</td>
<td>18.35 (10.42)</td>
<td>18.07 (10.54)</td>
<td>18.74 (10.29)</td>
<td>0.563 (307)</td>
<td>0.86</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Anxiety</td>
<td>68.68 (15.75)</td>
<td>66.83 (16.14)</td>
<td>71.26 (14.89)</td>
<td>2.452 (307)*</td>
<td>0.91</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

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.