

Social Anxiety, Avoidant Personality Disorder, and Emotion Socialization

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Introduction

Research shows that social anxiety, the fearful anticipation of possible embarrassment in social situations (Cox et al., 2004), can emerge in childhood through the expression of shyness (Colonnesi et al., 2017). Parents who are unresponsive to their children's emotions can influence their children to experience internalizing problems like anxiety (Kehoe, et al., 2011). The anxiety may persist into adulthood and develop into avoidant personality disorder (Denny et al., 2015), which is characterized by constant avoidance of social interactions for fear of rejection and inferiority, and blaming oneself for poor outcomes (Lampe & Malhi, 2018).

Many studies on parenting have focused primarily on the effects of the mother, but the influence of a father can also be important. For example, Bögels and Perotti (2011) found that fathers had a greater effect than mothers on their child's socially anxious behaviors. We aim to study both the effects of fathers and mothers on their child's anxiety problems.

We hypothesize that, 1) parents who show a lack of regard to their child's anxiety will be associated with higher levels of anxiety, and AVP in the child, and 2) the sex of the parent will influence the association between lack of regard and child anxiety, and AVP. Specifically, children whose fathers ignore their anxiety will be more anxious than children whose mothers ignore their anxiety.

Method

Participants: 396 emerging adults (72.2% female; 76.3% Caucasian, 3.5% African American, 13.4% Hispanic/Latino, 2% Asian, 3.3% other race/ethnicity, 1.5% unknown; 91.7% reports on mothers)

Measures: The Achenbach Adult Self-Report (Achenbach, Rescorla, 2003) was used to assess anxiety problems and AVP. The Emotions as a Child (Magai, 1996) was used to measure participants' self-reports of their parent's (mother or father) response when they were feeling afraid.

Procedures: Data was collected through a battery of self-reports.

Table 1. Bivariate Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	M	SD
1. Supportive	(.82)									9.11	2.94
2. Override	.59**	(.54)								7.12	2.65
3. Neglect	-.55**	-.27**	(.85)							1.28	2.29
4. Punishment	-.32**	-.09	.64**	(.75)						1.64	2.37
5. Magnify	.11*	.13*	.19**	.32**	(.82)					2.79	2.87
6. Anxiety	-.08	.03	.12*	.10*	.15**	(.79)				5.57	3.11
7. Avoidant	-.18**	-.02	.18**	.15**	.23**	.65**	(.81)			4.11	3.24
8. Age	-.11*	-.06	.07	.08	-.02	.03	-.01	-		19.11	1.31
9. Child Sex	-.06	-.04	.06	.15**	.03	-.18**	-.09	.18**	-	-	-
10. Parent Sex	-.12*	-.09	.03	.16**	-.04	-.04	-.03	.10*	.18**	-	-

Note. Numbers in parentheses are Cronbach's alphas. Sex coded as 0 = female, 1 = male.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 2. Parent Emotion Socialization Styles, Anxiety, & Avoidant Personality

	Overall				Mothers				Fathers			
	ANX		AVP		ANX		AVP		ANX		AVP	
	β	95 CI	β	95 CI	β	95 CI	β	95 CI	β	95 CI	β	95 CI
M 1. SUP	-.09	-.19, .01	-.19***	-.32, .10	-.09	-.21, .01	-.20***	-.33, -.10	.05	-.39, .29	-.29	-.72, .01
M 2. OVR	.02	-.09, .14	-.02	-.15, .10	.01	-.10, .13	-.03	-.16, .09	.17	-.21, .63	-.02	-.52, .45
M 3. NEG	.12*	.04, .30	.18***	.12, .40	.12*	.03, .30	.17**	.09, .38	.21	-.19, .77	.35*	.14, .28
M 4. PUN	.14*	.05, .31	.18**	.10, .38	.13*	.04, .32	.16**	.09, .38	.20	-.13, .48	.32*	.05, .70
M 5. MAG	.16**	.07, .27	.23***	.15, .37	.15**	.05, .27	.21***	.12, .35	.25	-.08, .34	.29	.01, .69

Note. M = Model, ANX = anxiety problems, AVP = avoidant personality problems, SUP = supportive, OVR = override, NEG = neglect, PUN = punishment, MAG = magnify, and CI = confidence interval. Sex coded as 0 = female, 1 = male. Standardized betas are reported.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 3. Parent Emotion Socialization Styles, Anxiety, & Avoidant Personality

	Overall		Mothers		Fathers	
	ANX	AVP	ANX	AVP	ANX	AVP
	β	β	β	β	β	β
Child Age	.06	-.01	.07	-.01	-.10	-.07
Child Sex	-.21***	-.11*	-.18**	-.04	-.43*	-.64***
Parent Sex	-.02	-.03	-	-	-	-
Supportive	-.13	-.27***	-.14	-.28***	-.18	-.30
Override	.09	.11	.09	.12	.22	.05
Neglect	.03	.01	.01	-.01	.22	.25
Punishment	.04	.01	.04	.02	-.08	.00
Magnify	.14*	.24***	.13*	.22***	.25	.36*
Total R²	.08***	.12***	.07**	.10***	.36	.66***

Note. Sex coded as 0 = female, 1 = male. Standardized betas reported.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Results and Discussion

Fifteen separate regression analyses were conducted to test each parental style in predicting anxiety or AVP, while controlling for sex and age of the child (Table 2). Next, three linear regression analyses were conducted with all parental styles entered simultaneously, while controlling for sex of the child and parent, and age of the child, to predict anxiety or AVP (Table 3). We did this for the overall sample, and for mothers and fathers separately.

Overall

Consistent with our hypothesis, children whose parents neglected, punished, and magnified their fear had greater anxiety problems, and AVP. Whereas children whose parents were supportive had lower avoidance. When controlling for the other parenting styles, only magnification was uniquely associated with greater anxiety problems and AVP, and supportiveness was uniquely associated with lower AVP.

Mothers

Our second hypothesis was not supported. We found stronger associations among mothers than fathers. Children whose fears were ignored, punished or mirrored by their mothers reported greater anxiety and avoidance, whereas having supportive mothers was associated with lower avoidance. Only mothers magnifying fear uniquely predicted greater anxiety and AVP, while supportive mothers uniquely predicted lower AVP symptoms.

Fathers

Having fathers dismiss, ignore, or punish fears were associated with greater AVP. When controlling for the other parenting styles, only magnifying the child's fear uniquely predicted more AVP symptoms.

The differential pattern of study results suggest that anxiety and AVP may have slightly different origins, but may also share commonality in relation to a pathway of experiencing parents who may magnify and catastrophize the fear that a child experiences. Further, the results suggest that mothers may have a more general effect on their children's anxiety and AVP problems, whereas for fathers it appears specific to enduring changes in personality. However, a major limitation of our study was the small number of participants reporting on fathers, so we interpret these results cautiously. Future research would benefit from recruiting more fathers and examining their effects in more depth.

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