ATTACHMENT TO THE THERAPIST

Margaret Parish, PhD, and Morris N. Eagle, PhD
Adelphi University

This study examines the ways in which therapists function as attachment figures for patients. Patients in long-term psychoanalytic therapy answered questionnaires about their feelings about their therapists and their closest personal relationships. Components of attachment prominent in the therapeutic relationships were looking up to the therapist and feeling the therapist was responsive to emotional needs. Stronger attachment to therapists was associated with greater frequency and duration of therapy, a stronger working alliance, and greater security of the patients' attachment style, as well as with the gender of the patient and therapist. Using attachment theory to understand psychoanalytic relationships emphasizes the unique importance of a therapist to a patient and can offer new perspectives on both therapeutic and attachment processes.

There seems to be an increasing consensus that therapeutic change is based not only on cognitive factors such as awareness and insight, but also on the nature of the relationship between patient and therapist. And at least since Freud's (1912/1963a, 1905/1963b, 1915/1953) writings on the concept of transference, there has been wide recognition that patients in psychotherapy often experience strong feelings toward their therapists. One useful way of understanding the therapeutic relationship when it works well is that the therapist, at least in certain respects, serves as an attachment figure, as a "secure base" from which the patient can explore his or her inner world (Bowlby, 1988). Although understanding the therapeutic relationship in this way makes a good deal of intuitive sense, there has been little empirical research on the therapist as an attachment figure.

Margaret Parish, PhD, and Morris N. Eagle, PhD, Gordon F. Derner Institute of Advanced Psychological Studies, Adelphi University.

This study was supported by a grant from the Center for Mental Health Promotion.

This article is based on a doctoral dissertation conducted at Adelphi University by Margaret Parish under the direction of Morris N. Eagle. We are grateful to Patrick L. Ross for invaluable assistance in analyzing the data; to members of the workgroup on adult attachment at the Derner Institute for their contributions to the early conceptual design; and to E. Virginia Demos, J. Christopher Fowler, Erica M. Plakun, Stefanie L. Speanburg, and Stuart W. Twemlow for comments on an earlier version of this article.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Margaret Parish, PhD, who is now a postdoctoral fellow at the Austen Riggs Center, 25 Main Street, Stockbridge, Massachusetts 01262. E-mail: Margaret.Parish@austenriggs.net
Research report

Experience-dependent asymmetric variation in primate prefrontal morphology

David M. Lyons a,*, Hagop Afarian a, Alan F. Schatzberg a, Anne Sawyer-Glover b, Michael E. Moseley b

a Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science, Psychiatry Neuroscience, Stanford University Medical School, 1201 Welch Road, MSLS Room P104, Mail Code 5485, Stanford, CA 94305-5485, USA
b Department of Radiology, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA

Received 12 September 2001; received in revised form 5 April 2002; accepted 5 April 2002

Abstract

Theories of human development suggest that experiences embedded in social relationships alter prefrontal brain systems that mediate emotional self-regulation. This study tests for experience-dependent effects on prefrontal gray and white matter volumes determined in 39 young adult monkeys (Simia sciureus) 4 years after conditions that modified early maternal availability. These conditions were previously shown to alter subsequent measures of emotional behavior, social propensities, and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis stress physiology. Here we identify significant differences in right but not left adult prefrontal volumes, with experience-dependent asymmetric variation most clearly expressed in ventral medial cortex measured in vivo by magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Follow-up studies now need to determine whether maternal availability directly affects or interacts with subsequent experiences to alter prefrontal substrates of emotional processing and sensitivity to stress. © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Prefrontal cortex; Postnatal development; Early life stress; Emotional behavior; Hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal hormones; Magnetic resonance imaging; Nonhuman primates

1. Introduction

Growth and development of the prefrontal cortex extends across childhood into early adulthood in human and nonhuman primates [5,6,24,43,77]. This process corresponds with delayed maturation of attention, planning, cognitive control, and emotional self-regulation [17,25,44,52,62,78]. Based on indications that early experiences alter brain systems in rodents [26,42,55,70], theories of human development suggest that stressful experiences in social relationships modify prefrontal maturation [75].

Aside from a limited number of reports on inherited variation in autonomic activity [80] and cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) monoamine concentrations [12,32], primate research on stress neurobiology has focused on severe forms of maternal deprivation. Rhesus macaque monkeys raised without mothers exhibit increased brain dopamine and norepinephrine sensitivity [40,45], exaggerated hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) responses to stress [9,31], altered regulation of autonomic activity [53], fragmented sleep patterns [37], depression-like behavior [40], and excessive consumption of alcohol [20]. Ecologically informed research on maternal availability has likewise identified untoward effects on primate postnatal development. Bonnet macaque monkeys raised by mothers in variable foraging demand conditions are impaired in social and emotional development [2,69]. These same monkeys exhibit in early adulthood elevated CSF concentrations of monoamines, somatostatin, and corticotropin-releasing factor (CRF) [14,15]. Similar changes in stress neurobiology have been implicated in human psychiatric disorders that are triggered or aggravated by stress [11,54,73].
ABSTRACT: A model for the development of this mechanism is offered as well as evidence for it from five areas: (1) the nature of the association of early attachment and later cognitive functioning, (2) accumulating evidence for the association between secure attachment and the facility with which internal states are understood and represented, (3) the limited predictive value of early attachment classification, (4) the studies of the biological functions of attachment in other mammalian species, and (5) factor analytic studies of adult attachment scales that suggest the independence of attachment type and attachment quality. The author tentatively proposes that attachment in infancy has the primary evolutionary function of generating a mind capable of inferring and attributing causal motivational and epistemic mind states, and through these arriving at a representation of the self in terms of a set of stable and generalized intentional attributes thus ensuring social collaboration, whereas attachment in adulthood serves the evolutionary function of protecting the self representation from the impingements that social encounters inevitably create. Severe personality pathology arises when the psychological mechanism of attachment is distorted or dysfunctional and cannot fulfill its biological function of preserving the intactness of self representations.

RESUMEN: A partir de las siguientes cinco áreas, ofrecemos un modelo para el desarrollo de este mecanismo, así como prueba del mismo: (i) la naturaleza de la asociación entre la temprana afectividad y el funcionamiento cognitivo posterior, (ii) la acumulación de pruebas para determinar la asociación entre una afectividad segura y la facilidad con la cual los estados internos son comprendidos y representados, (iii) el limitado valor de predicción de la clasificación de la temprana afectividad, (iv) los estudios de las funciones biológicas de la afectividad en otras especies mamíferas, y (v) los estudios analíticos de factores de las escalas de la afectividad adulta que sugieren la independencia del tipo y calidad de la afectividad. El autor propone tentativamente que la afectividad en la infancia tiene como función primaria de evolución la de generar una mente capaz de deducir y atribuir estados mentales causales, de motivos y de conocimiento.


[72] Sandies F. The architecture of the cortical taste nerve areas in squirrel monkey (Saimiri sciureus) and their relationships to visceral, sensorimotor and prefrontal regions. Brain Research 1968;5:97–124.


