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Parental Bonding, Self-Esteem And Theory Of Mind Among Locals And Immigrants

Alessia Passanisi\textsuperscript{a} *, Andrea Gensabella\textsuperscript{a}, Concetta Pirrone\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}“Kore” University of Enna. Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, Cittadella Universitaria, Enna, 94100, Italy
\textsuperscript{b}University of Catania, Department of Formative Processes, via Biblioteca, 4, Catania, 95100, Italy

Abstract

Parental bonding is a relevant predictor that helps in understanding the parent-child relationship which plays an important role in the development of Theory of Mind (ToM) and in organizing judgments towards the self. Subjects were 140, aged between 19 and 25, 69 of whom local Italians and 71 immigrants recruited from the Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers of Mineo (South Italy), completed three self-report measures: Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI); Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE), and Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET-R). Locals reported higher rates on self-esteem (p<.001), ToM (p<.001) and parental care (p<.001), whereas immigrants scored higher than locals on parental overprotection (p<.001). Implications for psychological functioning, well-being and preventative initiatives aimed at helping immigrant people are discussed.

Keywords: Parental bonding; Theory of Mind; Self-esteem; Immigrants.

1. Introduction

A growing body of research in the last few decades has focused on social influences in the formation of children’s Theory of Mind (ToM), the capacity of processing that mediates the ability to represent the mental states

\textsuperscript{*} Alessia Passanisi. Tel.: +39-347-246-1121;
E-mail address: alessiapassanisi@gmail.com

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of others in order to understand and interpret their behaviour. For example Dunn, Brown, Slomkowski, Tesla & Young-blade (1991) reported a link between certain types of family interaction, attachment attitudes and children’s ToM performance. Parental bonding was also found to be associated with self-esteem level (e.g. Charoensuk, 2007). Thus it is clear that family, social and cultural environments play a relevant role in the development of ToM and self-worth.

1.1. Attachment bonds and ToM

Scholars have recently investigated how early experiences influence the development of mental states (including ToM) by providing evidence of the importance of social experiences such as parent–child conversations about mental states (e.g. Brown, Donelan-McCall & Dunn, 1996) and the quality of the parent–child relationship (see Thompson, 2006, for a review). The idea that the parent–child relationship plays a relevant role in children forming representations of their social worlds has long been hypothesized by attachment theorists who claim that the quality of the attachment relationship modulates children’s understanding of themselves and others (Bowlby, 1969, 1982). Therefore, attachment relationships give children the means by which to attend to and employ mental representations of others in order to direct their own behaviour. This process has many similarities to ToM, whereby children build models of people’s beliefs and desires that explain their behaviour. The relational framework in which conversations take place is an important element to consider. Research in this area argues that the quality of the parent-child relationship may interfere with the development of psychological understanding. High maternal and paternal care with low overprotection is the optimal parental bonding pattern as originally proposed by Parker, Tupling & Brown (1979).

1.2. Self-esteem and cultural differences

According to William James (Peterson, 1997), self-esteem consists of an overall judgment of the self at the emotional and affective levels. In other words, self-esteem is the attitude towards the self related to personal satisfaction or disappointment. Self-esteem evolves during adolescence and slowly increases during young adulthood. There is a difference in the factors that affect the development of self-esteem in the two sexes: men are influenced by the confidence in their own abilities and women by emotional factors such as relationships with significant others (Di Maria & Di Nuovo, 1990). In general at any age, emotionally stable, extraverted and conscientious individuals experienced higher self-esteem than emotionally unstable, introverted and less conscientious individuals; low risk taking, high sense of mastery and better physical health predicted higher self-esteem (Erol & Orth, 2011). Moreover, an unstable self is linked to a variety of maladaptive affective and behavioral response patterns, including the propensity to experience anger and hostility (Kernis, Grannemann & Barclay, 1989) as well as depression (Kernis, Grannemann, & Mathis, 1991). Schmitt & Allik (2005) found cultural differences in perceived self-esteem: people from East Asian countries reported lower levels of global self-esteem than those from Western countries. Nevertheless Cai, Brown, Deng & Oakes (2007) have shown that cultural differences are primarily due to cognitive self-evaluations (e.g. modesty) rather than affective self-regard.

2. Purpose of study

This study aimed at investigating the relationship between parental bonding, self-esteem and ToM among emerging adults in which gender and cultural differences were taken into consideration.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants included 140 subjects (males=91, females=49) of whom 69 were local Italians and 71 were immigrants coming from Eritrea (Africa), recruited from the Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers of Mineo (Italy).
The participants’ ages ranged from 19 to 25 years old (M=26.01; SD=3.73). As regards social background, these immigrants were, according to Reyneri’s (2004) classification, “underprivileged”, with low social status and poor education (working class and lower class) who had experienced traumatic situations in their country of origin such as torture, rape, violation of rights and freedom perpetrated by political power, racial discrimination, obstruction of freedom and religion, etc. Such abuses have forced them to deal with grueling travel, often for several years, crossing deserts and unknown lands, before reaching the coasts of North Africa to embark on the final “journey of hope” to Italy. The immigrant subjects were able to understand task instructions (by means of a cultural mediator), and were matched by educational level with the native sample.

3.2. Measures

The Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI; Parker, Tupling & Brown, 1979) is a 25-item questionnaire designed to assess two dimensions of perceived parental bonding: care (12 items; e.g. “Appeared to understand my problems and worries”) and overprotection (13 items; e.g. “Tried to make me feel dependent on him”). Each item is rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (very unlike) to 3 (very like). Among the 25 items, there are six negative items in each dimension, whose scores are reversed and added to those of the others, resulting in a summary score ranging from 0–36 for the care dimension and 0–39 for the overprotection dimension. Care involves a spectrum from parental affection, warmth and empathy (high scores) to parental coldness, indifference and rejection (low scores). Overprotection or control ranges from intrusiveness to infantilization (high scores) to the detached promotion of independence (low scores). The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965) is the most commonly used and well-validated instrument for the assessment of global self-esteem. It consists of five negative items and five positive items. Participants are asked to rate each item on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The scores of the five negative items are reversed and added to the five positive items, resulting in a summary score ranging from 10 to 40. The total score indicates the level of global self-esteem. The RMET-R (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, & Hill 2001) is a standard test of ToM which assesses the ability to interpret mental states from 36 photographs focused on eye region alone. Participants are asked to choose which of four complex mental state descriptors (one target word and three distractors) best describes the thoughts or feelings expressed by different subjects. A glossary of the mental state words is given to participants to consult at any point if required.

4. Results

The independent variables considered in the design of our experiment were gender (male or female) and provenience (locals or immigrants). An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run within subjects with the two factors described above. We found significant differences in the overall sample between males and females: the latter reported higher scores on the RMET-R (F=6.96, p<.001). Locals scored higher on the RSE scale (F=68.68, p<.001), RMET-R (F=474.86, p<.001) and on PBI items measuring parental care (maternal care: F= 118.24, p<.001; paternal care: F=64.46, p<.001), whereas immigrants reported higher rates for the overprotection items of PBI (maternal overprotection: F=17.25, p<.001; paternal overprotection: F=28.72, p<.001). For the overall sample RMET-R was positively associated with RSE (r=.61, p=.001) and parental care (maternal care: r=.64, p=001; paternal care: r=.55, p=.001) while negatively associated with parental overprotection (maternal overprotection: r=-.37, p=.001; paternal overprotection: r=-.44, p=.001). Finally, RSE was positively associated with parental care (maternal care: r=.57, p=.001; paternal care: r=.56, p=.001).

5. Discussion and conclusions

Results showed that immigrants had lower self-esteem and ToM ability than locals; moreover they suffered from a lack of parental care. The latter result can be explained culturally. In Eritrea, the mother plays a vital role in the care and support of the child only during the first few years of life, until he/she becomes self-sufficient. At this point, the father has “control” of the child, guiding his entrance into society until adulthood. Such lack of affection, in addition to traumatic situations, repeated over time (war, deprivation, torture and violence) predisposes them to
develop maladaptive personality traits and negative emotions that weaken the personality and reduce the capability to face daily problems (e.g. Leanza, Passanisi, & Leanza 2013; Passanisi, Leanza & Leanza, 2013; Schimmenti, & Caretti, 2010; Schimmenti, 2012). Therefore it becomes clear how functional relationships with significant others, such as parents, are crucial for the development of a healthy personality and to prevent the formation of negative attitudes (e.g. Pace, Cacioppo, & Schimmenti, 2012; Schimmenti, Guglielmiucci, Barbasio, & Granieri, 2012; Schimmenti, & Bifulco, 2013; Schimmenti, Passanisi, Gervasi, Manzella, & Famà, 2013; Schimmenti, Passanisi, Pace, Manzella, Di Carlo & Caretti, 2014). In addition, living in difficult conditions such as those described above generates low self-esteem. In fact, this construct is developed according to the perceived social feedback obtained from the members of the cultural context. Most of the time the immigrants are negatively judged by the local population. The modified concept of “immigrant individual” is considered differently from its head noun “individual” as it does not inherit all the features from it (Hampton, Passanisi, & Jonsson, 2011): immigrants are considered less talented than local individuals and simply viewed as people who live in precarious conditions, doing the unwanted jobs and, because of the difficulties of obtaining a permanent residence permit or Italian citizenship, living clandestinely. Moreover, exploring the correlations, this study suggests that high parental care relates to high self-esteem, and this appears to be true for both sexes. This is relevant because it potentially gives insight into the interpersonal processes associated with low self-esteem and to the intrapersonal dynamics related to dysfunctional attachment bonds. Humans are social creatures who invest a lot of energy in their interpersonal relationships. The quality of our relationships with others affects our well-being and psychological functioning (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), including our level of self-worth. Conversely, high perceived self-worth has important implications for our interpersonal functioning. The findings of this study suggest that preventive interventions may be useful to immigrants in order to boost self-esteem and strengthen ToM at the individual level, whereas interventions that promote positive parental bonding could be implemented at a familial level.

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