

Research Paper

The Mediating Role of Empathy and Emotion Regulation in Attachment Styles and Dark Personality Traits in Adolescents



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Citation Amiri S, Jamali Y. [The Mediating Role of Empathy and Emotion Regulation in Attachment Styles and Dark Personality Traits in Adolescents (Persian)]. Iranian Journal of Psychiatry and Clinical Psychology. 2019; 25(3):292-307. <http://dx.doi.org/10.32598/ijpcp.25.3.292>

<http://dx.doi.org/10.32598/ijpcp.25.3.292>



Received: 26 Jun 2018
Accepted: 20 Apr 2019
Available Online: 01 Oct 2019

Key words:

Personality, Emotions, Empathy

ABSTRACT

Objectives The current study investigated the mediating role of emotion regulation and empathy between attachment styles and dark personality traits.

Methods In total, 350 teenage students from Bushehr schools were selected based on convenience sampling method in the academic year of 2017-18. Then, dark traits test, emotional dysregulation, attachment styles, and empathy were distributed among research participants to respond. Collected data were analyzed by correlation indicators and path analysis in LISREL software.

Results There was a significant correlation between the components of dark personality traits, empathy, emotional dysregulation, and attachment styles ($P < 0.05$). Moreover, path analysis modeling indicated the mediating role of emotional dysregulation and empathy in the relationship between attachment styles and dark traits ($P < 0.05$).

Conclusion The obtained results supported the hypothesis that attachment styles lead to dark traits tendencies and emotional dysregulation. Furthermore, empathy can have a moderating role in this regard.

Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

The present study examined the mediating role of emotion regulation and empathy in the relationship between attachment styles and dark personality traits. The dark triad traits model assumes three distinct features; Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. Machiavellianism tends to be ambitious, delinquent, controlling, and immoral. Narcissism is characterized by several interpersonal disorders, including excessive self-confidence and hostile behaviors. Psychopathy includes emotional slowness, deceptive interpersonal styles, impulsive behavior, and irresponsibility.

From evolutionary psychologists' perspective, dark personality traits can be influenced by the socioeconomic conditions of childhood. Evidence suggests that attachment disorders are among the factors that contribute to personality-related psychopathology. Bowlby focuses on the quality of the primary communication between the child and the guardian and emphasizes the level of security that the child feels in the world. Symptoms of attachment disorder appear to be related to dark traits.

Furthermore, considering that attachment is an emotional component, the dimensions of emotional regulation and empathy also affect the effect of attachment on the growth of personality traits. Individuals with dark personality characteristics fail to experience emotional distress when exposed to other people's suffering. This lack of emo-

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tional responsiveness may allow people with high levels of dark triad personality to manage and exploit others with relatively little concern for the consequences of their behaviors. Empathy is a complex psychological response in which observation, memory, knowledge, and reasoning are combined to bring insights into the thoughts and feelings of others. Investigating relationship between dark traits and cognitive and emotional empathy suggests that Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy are negatively related to emotional empathy; however, those are poorly linked to cognitive empathy.

2. Methods

This was a fundamental and descriptive- correlational study. The statistical study population included Boushehr high-school male students in the 2016-17 academic year. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed among the students. Moreover, 318 questionnaires data were entered

into the statistical analysis by deleting the incomplete data (incomplete questionnaires). To collect data, dark triad personality tests, attachment styles questionnaire, emotion dysregulation scale-short form, and empathy and sympathy scale were used.

3. Results

There was a significant correlation between the components of dark personality traits, empathy, emotion dysregulation, and attachment styles ($P < 0.05$) (Table 1) (Figure 1). Furthermore, fearful attachment directly affected emotion dysregulation, psychopathy, and narcissism.

The occupied attachment directly affected emotion, dysregulation, and Machiavellianism. The ambivalent attachment directly impacts the emotion dysregulation, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. There was a direct negative correlation between empathy and Machiavellianism and

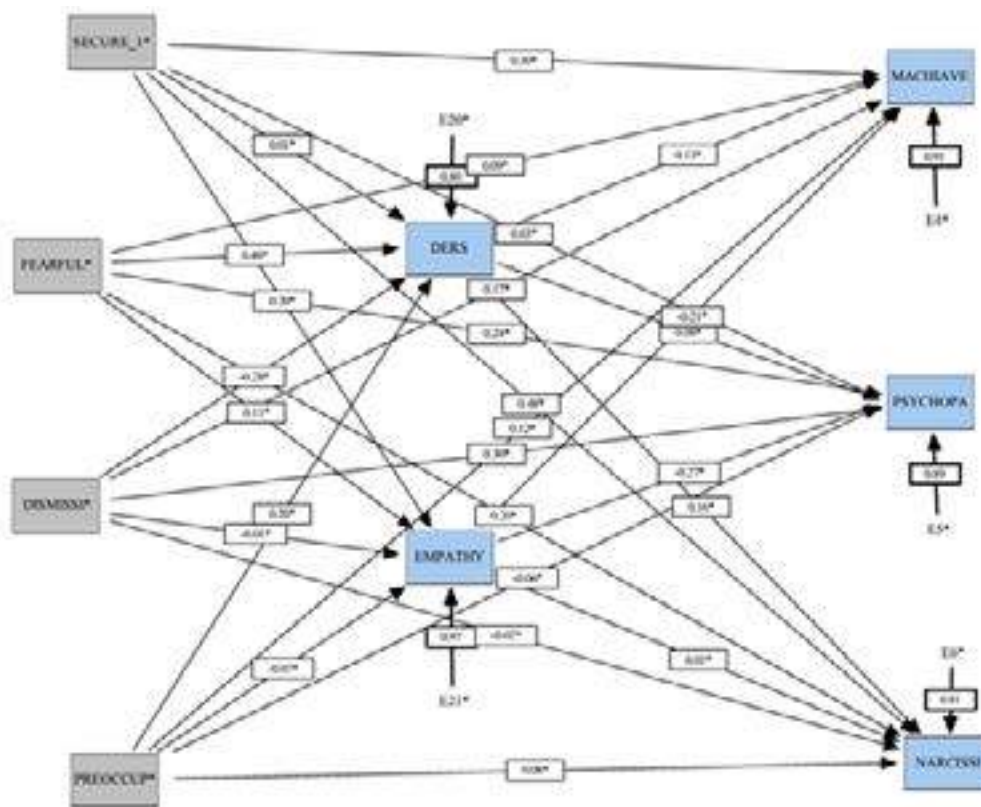


Figure 1. The path diagram of the relationship between attachment styles and dark personality traits with the mediating role of difficulty of emotion dysregulation and empathy

Table 1. Model indices

Indices	χ^2	df	P	RMSEA	SRMR	NFI	NNFI	CFI	IFI	GFI	AGFI
value	76.63	39	>0.05	0.02	0.01	0.92	0.91	0.95	0.83	0.89	0.91

Iranian Journal of
PSYCHIATRY AND CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Iranian Journal of
PSYCHIATRY AND CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

psychopathy. In addition, emotion dysregulation had a direct effect on the Machiavellianism and narcissism. Considering the fitness indices representing the optimal fit of the model with the research data, the research hypothesis was confirmed in this model.

4. Discussion

The obtained results indicated that attachment styles directly impact the dark triad personality. Emotion dysregulation mediated the connection between disruptive attachment styles and dark triad personality. Furthermore, empathy moderated the indirect relationship of immune style with the trait of psychopathy and Machiavellianism. Additionally, empathy has no role in the indirect relationship between disruptive attachment styles and dark traits. Investigating the experiences of attachment and the quality of parenting relationships in psychopathic and Machiavelli individuals suggested that those who had very high scores in these traits were characterized by decreasing attachment bonds. In addition, insecure and disruptive attachment styles and their symptoms are common among criminals. A childhood disadvantaged environment is likely to play a significant role in the development of psychopathic characters.

Furthermore, studies of psychopathy reported this fact, which is confirmed by some empirical evidence [37, 38]. Therefore, the contributing factors of psychopathic personality are the failure of childhood attachment systems. Moreover, research studies revealed that the pathological traits of personality are strongly related to different dimensions of emotion dysregulation. Scholars investigated the relationship between pathological personality traits and emotional responsiveness to daily events. They concluded that negative excitability, diffusion, and hostility moderate the relationship between adverse interpersonal events and negative emotional state.

Furthermore, people with high levels of diffusion lack emotional clarity. These findings suggest that pathological personality traits with high emotional responsiveness are related to interpersonal negative daily events [43].

Therefore, in people with dark personality traits who have disrupted attachment styles, negative childhood experiences have caused emotion dysregulation in these individuals. In explaining the mediator role of empathy, research evidence suggests that activating context creates a sense of secure attachment; it encourages individuals to provide empathic responses and less interpersonal anxiety in response to the others' needs. The sense of secure attachment

is mainly activated by sympathetic and friendly engagement with others [46]. Therefore, establishing positive and empathic relationships with others, especially parents, and encouraging parents to establish positive relationships with others can help to reduce the emergence of symptoms of dark personality traits.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

All ethical principles were observed in this study. An informed consent was obtained from the participants and their information remained confidential. They were also free to leave the study at any time.

Funding

We received no any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Authors contributions

Conceptualization, initial draft preparation, data analysis and editing by Sohrab Amiri; Data curation and writing by Yosef Jamali.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.