The Effects of Parent Attachment and Parenting Styles on Decision-Making in College Students

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Hypotheses and Results

Means

Means for conscientiousness and impulse control were slightly below the midpoint, with a fairly restricted variance (SD's = .55 and .66, respectively). Means for permissiveness were below the midpoint, with a fairly wide variance (SD's = .71, .71, and .71, respectively). Means for parent authoritative and authoritarian styles were above the midpoint for both parents; means for permissiveness were below the midpoint. Variance in parenting styles was less than that for parent attachment (SD's = .58-.93). Means for avoidant and spontaneous decision-making were above the midpoint; means for the other decision-making variables were lower. Rational decision-making had the lowest scores. Variance was fairly narrow (SD's = .60-.83).

Preliminary Analyses

Age had no effect on any of the variables. Males were more conscientious and reported more permissive fathers than females. Males reported more rational decision-making than females; females reported more avoidant decision-making. Students reported more attachment anxiety and avoidance with fathers than with mothers. They also reported that their fathers were more authoritarian and their mothers more authoritative.

Primary Analyses

Because conscientiousness is associated with being right-minded, thoughtful, and efficient, conscientiousness should predict more rational decision-making and less avoidant decision-making (Bechara, 2005; Hou et al, 2013). These predictions were supported.

Because impulse control is associated with the ability to control impulses, avoidant decision-making should predict more less spontaneous and perhaps less avoidant and dependent decision-making (Bechara, 2005; Hou et al, 2013). These predictions were supported.

Because securely attached children (low attachment anxiety) become confident adults (Petegem et al, 2012) and attachment anxiety is associated with attachment anxiety and avoidance, these predictions were partially supported, but for fathers only. Attachment avoidance toward fathers predicted less rational and more avoidant decision-making. Attachment avoidance toward mothers predicted more dependent and spontaneous decision-making. These predictions were not supported.

Because securely attached children (low attachment avoidance) become confident adults (Petegem et al, 2012) and attachment avoidance is associated with the need to be self-sufficient and with avoidance in later relationships, these predictions were partially supported, but for fathers only. Attachment avoidance toward fathers predicted less rational and more avoidant decision-making. Attachment avoidance toward mothers predicted more dependent and spontaneous decision-making.

Because authoritative parents are involved, responsive, and scaffold their children's problem-solving skills (Bednar & Fisher, 2003), authoritative parenting should predict more rational and intuitive decision-making and less avoidant, dependent, and spontaneous decision-making. These predictions were not supported. Unexpectedly, authoritative parenting predicted less rational and intuitive decision-making and more spontaneous decision-making.

Because authoritarian parents make children's decisions for them and don't scaffold their children's problem-solving skills (Bednar & Fisher, 2003), authoritarian parenting should predict more avoidant and dependent decision-making. These predictions were partially supported, but for mothers only. Authoritarian mothering predicted more dependent (but not more avoidant) decision-making. Unexpectedly, authoritarian fathering predicted more rational decision-making.

Because permissive parents are extremely accepting and involved but do not help their children with problem-solving (Bednar & Fisher, 2003), permissive parenting should predict more dependent decision-making. This was not supported.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of parent attachment and parenting styles on decision-making in college students. Our hypotheses were not consistently supported and a few were contradicted, but there were unexpected results that were consistent with our hypotheses and with the literature we reviewed for the study. Overall, the idea that parent attachment and parenting styles, as well as personality, could influence later decision-making styles was well supported: we explained 25%-36% of the variance for four of the five decision-making styles.

Conscientiousness, impulse control, avoidant attachment, and authoritative and authoritarian parenting all emerged as significant predictors of decision-making styles. Avoidant attachment and permissive parenting did not emerge in any of the regressions. Of note is that mothers and fathers influenced decision-making in different ways. Avoidant decision-making was predicted by avoidance toward fathers; independent, intuitive, and more permissive decision-making was predicted by avoidance toward the mother and/or by maternal parenting styles; rational decision-making was predicted by parent variables involving both parents. While some of these relationships were consistent with expectations, others are hard to explain. Authoritative mothering, for example, predicted less intuitive and less rational decision-making, and authoritarian fathering more rational decision-making. This does not, however, negate the importance of these variables in predicting decision-making. It suggests that the relationships are complex and need to be further explored.

Limitations of our study included a small sample size from a limited population (college students), over-representation of females, and a limited selection of personality variables. We believe the impact of parent attachment and parenting styles on decision-making warrants further exploration with a larger and more diverse population and a wider range of variables.