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Comfort Objects and Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract

The use of comfort objects is common among children and can have a lasting importance. The purpose of this study was to examine a possible relationship between childhood comfort object use and relationship satisfaction among young adults currently in a romantic relationship. Participants completed three questionnaires. The first questionnaire gathered information on participants experience with comfort objects in childhood, such as level of attachment and type of object. The second tested for general anxiety. The third looked at relationship satisfaction. Results did not reveal any significant relationships, which suggests that additional research is needed to explore possible links between the use of comfort objects and relationship satisfaction. Future research might look at potential maladaptive effects of comfort objects, in addition to positive effects.

Comfort Objects and Relationship Satisfaction in College Students

The formation and maintenance of romantic relationships is something many people will experience in their life. Adulthood is often considered the time to find a romantic partner (Aronsons, 2007). These relationships are, in part, products of our individual attachment styles (Pascuzzo, 2011). Attachment theory posits that the way we learn to relate to our primary caregiver as children, is related to our behavior in future relationships. An individual's attachment style in infancy is often stable into adulthood because early relationships create a mental framework for the self and the self's relation to the outside world. The way we form romantic relationships in adulthood, therefore, oftentimes looks like our early relationships (Hazan, 1987).

The influence of attachment style, among other traits of personality in childhood, is often present later in life (Shiner & Masten, 2012). The relationship styles that develop as a function of personality remain stable from relationship to relationship, whether it be a romantic relationship or a relationship with friends and family (Caron, Lafontaine, Bureau, Levesque, & Johnson, 2013). Furthermore, Pascuzzo, Cry, and Moss (2011) established that the attachment formed between parents and children is related to functioning in later romantic relationships. Specifically, they found that attachment insecurity towards parents is positively correlated with insecurity toward romantic partners (Pascuzzo, et al., 2011).

Attachment manifests in different ways, including relationships we form with non-living things, or comfort objects. According to Steier (2000), the emotional connection between children and their objects of importance is extremely strong. These comfort objects (i.e., teddy bears, blankets, pillows, etc.) have an emotional role in children's lives and can offer solace in the presence of strife (Steier, 2000). The objects often help teach children how to regulate their

own emotions, by offering tactile comfort or social interaction. For example, a child may seek out a stuffed animal when upset, to gain physical comfort from it (through cuddling, hugging, etc.) or by communicating with it to help process the upsetting event in a social way. This is an important developmental concept that is related to healthy relationships later in life (Steier, 2000). As comfort objects provide benefits during early development, it may be the case that lasting benefits exist that impact adult life.

There are other factors that could create a stronger than average attachment to comfort objects. How individuals process sensory information (information gathered through sight, smell, etc.) is related to attachment to comfort objects. This then plays a role in the development of attachment style (Jerome, 2005; Kalpidou, 2012). Specifically, anxiety created by oversensitivity to sensory information is directly connected with a dependence on comfort objects. Jerome (2005) found that relationship anxiety could be strengthened if an individual has a high sensitivity to sensory stimulation.

Anxiety plays a role in the relationship between comfort objects and attachment. Symptoms of anxiety are connected to an individual's ability to regulate emotions. Research suggests that the development of attachment leads a child to imitate the parents' coping strategies. For instance, children whose mothers exhibit anxiety have an increased chance of developing anxiety themselves. In addition to way this can be maladaptive, insecure attachment styles can contribute to a child never fully developing effective coping strategies. This then leads to anxiety (Esbjörn, 2012).

Comfort objects do not always lose meaning as childhood ends. Kamptner (1995) found that, out of 249 high school students, thirty percent still had their childhood comfort object, some of whom still used them (Kamptner, 1995). They found that a significant number of participants

used their objects for emotional activities, such as speaking to the object, needing it to sleep, or wanting it when upset. There was also a relationship between those who felt heavily attached to their object and their behavior later in life, specifically an increase in attachment (Kamptner, 1995).

Although research has provided a look into some aspects of the effects attachment to comfort objects can have, research has yet to explore their links to adult functioning, beyond specific psychological disorders. Having established the effect that early development has on stable personality traits, as well as the important role comfort objects can play in early relational development, the use of a comfort object might be related to an individual's relationship satisfaction in early adulthood.

We first wanted to explore whether having a comfort object in childhood would related to relationship satisfaction later in life. We were then interested if the perceived strength of this attachment is related to relationship satisfaction. We also wanted to see if anxiety would mediate the relationship between attachment and relationship satisfaction.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were 88 undergraduate students (52% female, *M* age = 18) from introductory psychology courses University of Tennessee who were at least 18 years of age and had been involved in at least one romantic relationship in the past. Twelve participants were thrown out due to incomplete responses and/or completing the study in less than 4 minutes.

Procedure

To complete the survey, participants were recruited through the university's online research system (SONA). Participants were sent from the main SONA website to Qualtrics,

where they completed the survey online. Upon completion, participants were redirected back to the SONA page and received extra credit towards a class.

Measures

Comfort Object Inventory. To measure whether participants possessed comfort objects in childhood, and how strong these attachments were, we created the Comfort Object Inventory. It also obtained some general information about the type of objects participants attached to and how they used said object. Participants first answered whether or not they possessed a comfort object in childhood and then rated their perceived attachment on a scale of one to ten. They then provided information on how long they used their comfort object.

Beck Anxiety Index. We used the Beck Anxiety Index (Beck, 1993) to measure the general anxiety levels of our participants, in order to see if anxiety has a mediating effect on either relationship satisfaction or comfort object use. Participants completed a 21-question survey, in which they rated how often they experience different anxiety symptoms and how bothered by them they were. Items were rated on a scale of zero (not at all) to three (severely- it bothered me a lot).

Couples Satisfaction Index. In order to measure relationship satisfaction, participants were asked to complete the Couples Satisfaction Index (Funk & Rogge, 2007), in reference to their most recent relationship. This is a 32-question inventory, which asks participants to respond to different topics related to relationship satisfaction and rate their degree of agreement or disagreement on a scale of zero to five.

Results

To address the first research question, a Pearson's chi-square test was used to compare frequencies of possessing a comfort object in childhood and relationship satisfaction. Those who

possessed a comfort object did not significantly differ from those who did not with regard to relationship satisfaction ($\chi^2 [1, 46] = 47.982, p = .392$).

A linear regression was conducted to examine the relationship between degree of attachment and relationship satisfaction. The level of perceived attachment to the individuals comfort object was entered as the independent variable, while relationship satisfaction was entered as the dependent variable. Results did not show a significant difference between levels of attachment, $B = 116.332, t(1,45) = 12.052, p < .001$.

Given that there was no relationship between degree of attachment and relationship satisfaction, we did not address the mediating role of anxiety.

Discussion

As the present study did not find a correlation between the use of comfort objects or strength of attachment and relationship satisfaction, additional research is needed to evaluate possible relationships. Having a larger sample size could potentially uncover more about this relationship.

As this study only looked at positive outcomes, it may have overlooked possible negative results from either lacking a comfort object or greater-than-average attachment to one. It may be the case that a significant part of the population suffers from maladaptive effects related to comfort object use, obscuring any positive effects. A more thorough study could test for both outcomes and look at what aspects of an individual might lead to each one.

As the study relied on participants recalling facts from childhood, there may be a high rate of response error. It might also be the case that participants were hesitant to report close attachment to these objects. A more reliable test might use a longitudinal approach, or

incorporate data from parents in addition to the young adults recollections. This could remove some error in the reports on attachment level and use of comfort objects.

Future research might look into the rate of negative versus positive results from using comfort objects and what characteristics lead to each. Additionally researchers might examine the effects that comfort object use might have in other areas of life, such as young children's friendship building techniques and coping strategies.

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