

On the tracks of externalizing symptomatology: the role of attachment coherence and self-regulation

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Abstract

Although the role of mentalization has been extensively explored among clinical and normative adult samples, a lack of studies in middle childhood still exists (Bosmans &

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Kerns, 2015; Ensink *et al.*, 2015). Following these considerations, the present study aims to explore the role of mentalization (operationalized as Reflective Functioning) as a mediator in the link between attachment coherence and psychological maladjustment, here considered as externalizing symptomatology. Child Attachment Interview (CAI; Shmueli-Goetz, Target, Fonagy & Datta, 2008; Cavanna, Bizzi, San Martini & Castellano, 2018) was administered to 95 community children ($M = 10.4$ years, $SD = 1.43$ years) and then coded with the Child and Adolescent Reflective Functioning Scale (CRFS; Ensink, Target, Duval & Oandasan, 2015; measured as Self- and Other-focused mentalization). Child Behavior Checklist for Ages 6-18 (Achenbach, 2001) was also administered to children's parents. Results showed that Self-focused mentalization, but not Other-focused mentalization, partially mediate the link between attachment coherence and externalizing symptomatology. Despite the preliminary nature of this study, our findings suggest the importance of considering the dimension of Self-focused mentalization (intended as the capability to recognize and to converse with own mental states) during middle-childhood as a dimension that could promote psychological adjustment. These considerations lead us to consider the need of specific interventions able to capture the specificity of middle-childhood period in which the attachment system changes from seeking proximity to the attachment figure to discovering external social relationship.