

Can relationship patterns be transferred? The influence of parent-child attachment on interpersonal harmony among adolescents

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Abstract: Based on attachment the theory and ecological systems theory, this paper explores the impact of parent-child attachment, on interpersonal harmony adolescents and the mechanism of psychological boundary and cognitive flexibility. Methods: 505 adolescents, were investigated by parent-child attachment questionnaire, psychological boundary questionnaire, cognitive flexibility questionnaire, and interpersonal comprehensive diagnostic scale, of which 51.5 % were boys. Results: Parent-child attachment was negatively predicted interpersonal harmony. In other words, the higher the level of parent-child attachment, the lower level of interpersonal disturbance, and the more harmonious the interpersonal relationship. Psychological boundary, and cognitive flexibility, play mediating roles between parent-child attachment, and interpersonal harmony respectively, and the mediation effect accounted for 15.58 and 18.83 % of the total effect respectively. The results support the parallel mediation model of parent-child attachment, and interpersonal harmony among adolescents. Conclusion: The results support the parallel mediation model of psychological boundary, and cognitive flexibility between parent-child attachment and interpersonal harmony.

Keywords: parent-child attachment; psychological boundary; cognitive flexibility; interpersonal harmony; adolescents.

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INTRODUCTION

Relevance of the study

As early as the 1960s, the social psychologist Schutz advocated that establishing harmonious interpersonal relationships is significant since everyone has interpersonal needs. Interpersonal harmony refers to the ability to flexibly coordinate the role requirements of different types of relationships, including parent-child relationships, friend relationships and colleague relationships, and to maintain appropriate intimacy with others in different relationships [1]. Harmonious interpersonal networks can provide individuals with emotional, material, and information social support. This kind of social support positively impacts mental health, both in terms of direct impact on mental health level, and in buffering the damage of stressful events to mental health [2]. According to the 5th edition of the United States Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders and Diagnosis, in-

terpersonal harmony is one of the diagnostic indicators of mental disorders, which may be caused when problems occur in social relationships such as family and friends [3]. Studies have explored the impact of interpersonal relationships on depression among college students in the post-epidemic era and concluded that interpersonal problems could positively predict depressive symptoms [4]. Moreover, interpersonal problems in the dormitory were highly correlated with depression levels [5]. For adolescents between the ages of 13 and 19, the more interpersonal stress they face, and the more likely they are to be in a prolonged state of high levels of depression. However, problems such as interpersonal sensitivity of adolescents, during this period, are prominent [7], increasing their susceptibility to psychological problems. Therefore, exploring the influencing factors of interpersonal harmony among adolescents, and parent-child attachment, and their impact remains essential, to better understand how to foster psychological growth, and social development.

The association between parent-child attachment and interpersonal harmony

The attachment theory advocates that "the internal working model", of attachment relationships, will affect the development of subsequent social interpersonal relationships [8]. In other words, the relationship model may be migrated, profoundly impacting its future social adaptation and emotional regulation [9]. It is well-established that securely attached individuals are more likely to be trustworthy and form stronger interpersonal relationships [10; 11], resulting in a lower degree of interpersonal disturbance, which is also the basis for individuals to establish a sense of interpersonal belonging [12]. Moreover, from the perspective of ecosystem theory, the family system is an important part of the micro-system, and the dynamic development process between its internal subsystems will also have a direct impact on the intermediate system, that is to say, the relationship between the individual and their parents directly affects the relationship of teachers and classmates, etc. [13]. An empirical study of left-behind junior high school students, found that parent-child attachment is negatively correlated with teacher – student conflict; that is, higher security of parent-child attachment was associated with reduced teacher – student conflict and vice-versa [14]. In a study of bullied junior high school students, it was found that parent-child attachment was positively correlated with peer relationship and negatively correlated with each dimension of bullying; that is, a higher level of parent-child attachment security connoted with improved peer relationships and a lower susceptibility to bullying. Conversely, a lower level of parent-child attachment security was associated with poorer peer relationships and increased vulnerability to bullying [15]. Therefore, this study hypothesises that the parent-child attachment of adolescents yields a significant positive effect on interpersonal harmony.

The mediating role of psychological boundary

The psychological boundary is a dynamic process whereby individuals distinguish social distance, in social activities, between self and others [16]. Zerubavel stated that psychological boundaries are "mental walls" that enable individuals to establish a mental scope for exploring the meaning of the world [17]. The hypothesis that psychological boundary mediates the relationship, between parent-child attachment, and interpersonal harmony is based on two shreds of evidence. On the one hand, the attachment learning theory holds that insecure individuals, tend to form a negative and unstable self-concept. In this respect, insecure individuals who do not develop a safe basic script, do not know how to signal to others, and rely on others in times of distress, and are likely to develop cognitive schemas, about the unavailability of others, and about their unworthiness, which in turn leads to negative self-concepts [18]. At the same time, the self-classification theory believes that self-concept is the first component of individual psychological boundaries, and the instability of self-concept will increase the fuzziness of their psychological boundaries. Therefore, the harmonious parent-child relationship is conducive to a positive, and stable self-concept, thereby improving the clarity of psychological boundaries [19]. Moreover, some studies have found that psychological boundaries positively correlate with interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, empathy mediates the relationship

between parent-child attachment, and interpersonal harmony [20], and the problem of excessive involvement of empathy, can be solved by establishing explicit self-boundaries, thus promoting interpersonal harmony. Therefore, it was concluded that psychological boundaries mediate the effect of parent-child attachment on interpersonal harmony among adolescents.

The mediating role of cognitive flexibility

Cognitive flexibility refers to the capacity to recognise and adapt to various problem-solving approaches in a specific situation to achieve objectives flexibly. This ability develops during school-age to adolescence [21]. As an important component of executive function, cognitive flexibility helps individuals adjust their thoughts and behaviours rapidly, respond to changing environmental requirements and goals [22], and predict a range of adaptive outcomes [23]. Cognitive flexibility may also mediate between parent-child attachment, and interpersonal harmony among adolescents. This hypothesis comes from the following two lines of evidence. On the one hand, related studies have confirmed that the mother's emotional support during her child's problem-solving may be an important proximal mechanism for promoting cognitive flexibility in early childhood. The mother's emotional and supportive communication can affect children's ability to acquire and improve cognitive skills; the expression of care creates a positive psychological environment for children and is beneficial to the development of children's cognitive flexibility [24]. In addition, cognitive regulation is the beginning of the adaptation process [25]. It is widely thought that individuals with low cognitive flexibility are more likely to have hopelessness, due to insufficient problem-solving ability in the face of stress, resulting in depression [26]. Indeed, depression is significantly correlated with interpersonal sensitivity [7]. In contrast, individuals with higher cognitive flexibility, can actively adjust themselves and exhibit greater adaptability to change and self-efficacy [27], conducive to the generation and development of positive interpersonal relationships [28]. On the other hand, some studies have found that cognitive flexibility mediates psychological resilience and creativity [29]. Cognitive flexibility also partially mediates the relationship between childhood psychological abuse and depression [30]. These results suggest that cognitive control mediates the relationship between self-processing, and problem-solving or emotion management. Interestingly, individuals with strong cognitive control possess stronger interpersonal skills and exhibit more positive coping styles [31]. Individuals with weak cognitive control are prone to have repetitive negative thoughts, which can lead to depression [32]. Accordingly, it can be inferred that cognitive flexibility mediates the relationship between parent-child attachment and interpersonal harmony.

The current study

Based on the attachment theory and the ecosystem theory, three hypotheses were proposed in this study:

- 1) parent-child attachment level can positively predict interpersonal harmony of adolescents;
- 2) psychological boundary plays a mediating role between parent-child attachment and interpersonal harmony;
- 3) cognitive flexibility mediates the relationship between parent-child attachment and interpersonal harmony.

The research aim is to explore the mediating role of psychological boundary and cognitive flexibility in the relationship between parent-child attachment and interpersonal harmony among adolescents to lay the groundwork to improve the mental health of this population, and provide the basis for adolescent education and family education.

METHODS

Subjects

The present study involved 505 valid subjects from Jiangsu Province in China, male ($n=260$, 51.5 %) and female ($n=245$, 48.5 %) with a mean age of 17.47 years ($SD=1.061$) (range 15 to 19 years). This study was reviewed and approved by Jiangsu Normal University Scientific Research Ethics and Academic Evaluation Committee.

Tools

1. Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment, IPPA

A simplified version of the Parent-Child Attachment Sub-questionnaire of the Parental and Peer Attachment Questionnaire was used for measurement [33] containing 13 items, that describe the security of parent-child attachment from the aspects of parent-child trust, parent-child communication, and parent-child alienation (reverse score). Each item is rated on a scale of 1 to 5, with the options "never" and "always" corresponding to 1 and 5 points. A higher score indicated higher security of parent-child attachment. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.87.

2. Psychological Boundary Questionnaire, BQ

The brief version of the psychological boundary questionnaire revised by [34] was adopted, including 14 items with 5 grades rated 0–4 points. The options "very inconsistent" and "very consistent" corresponded to 0 and 4 points, respectively. A higher score indicated blurrier of psychological boundary. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.824.

3. Cognitive Flexibility Inventory, CFI

The cognitive flexibility questionnaire translated by [35] includes 20 items divided into two dimensions: selectivity and controllability. Items were rated on a scale of 1 to 5, with the options "never" and "always" corresponding to 1 and 5 points, except for items 2, 4, 7, 9, 11 and 17, which were scored in the reverse order. A higher score indicated greater cognitive flexibility. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.817.

4. Interpersonal Relationships Assessment Scale, IRAS

The comprehensive diagnostic scale of interpersonal relationships compiled by [36] was adopted, including 28 items, divided into 4 dimensions "conversation", "communication and friendship", "treatment of objects and people" and "heterosexual communication". A score of 1 point was given for answering "yes" and a score of 0 points for answering "no". A lower overall score was associated with less interpersonal disturbance, indicating a more harmonious relationship. Conversely, a higher score indicated more severe interpersonal issues. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this scale was 0.901.

Research design

Firstly, we recruited 546 adolescents, and instructed them to fill out 4 questionnaires in the section of "tool". Secondly, we excluded questionnaires with short response times, significant irregularities and missing values, 505 valid questionnaires were retrieved with a validity rate of 92.5 %. Finally, data descriptive analysis, and correlation analysis were performed with SPSS 22.0, and the mediation model was tested with Mplus 7.4. The Bootstrap method was used to test the significance of the mediating effect.

RESULTS

Control and test of common method deviation

In this study, Harman's one-way test was used to identify common method bias in the collected data. During unrotated exploratory factor analysis, 18 factors with an eigenvalue greater than 1 were extracted, and the maximum factor variance interpretation rate was 15.42 % (less than 40 %). Therefore, this study had no serious common method bias, and further statistical analysis could be performed.

Descriptive statistics and associated analyses

As shown in Table 1, correlation analysis showed that parent-child attachment was negatively correlated, with psychological boundary, and interpersonal harmony and positively correlated with cognitive flexibility. The psychological boundary was positively correlated with cognitive flexibility, and interpersonal relationships. Cognitive flexibility was negatively correlated with interpersonal relationships.

Mediation model analysis

This study used structural equation modelling to examine the relationship among parent-child attachment, psychological boundary, cognitive flexibility, and interpersonal harmony. Because gender and class leader experience were significantly correlated with parent-child attachment, psychological boundary, cognitive flexibility, and interpersonal harmony respectively, so that gender and class leader experience, should be included in model analysis. After controlling for gender and class leader experience, a mediation model was established with "parent-child attachment" as independent variable, "interpersonal harmony" as dependent variable, "psychological boundary" and "cognitive flexibility" as mediating variables (see Fig. 1) to investigate the mediating role of psychological boundary and cognitive flexibility.

The fit indices of the model were $\chi^2=2.382$, $df=1$, $\chi^2/df=2.382$, CFI=0.995, TLI=0.938, RMSEA=0.052, SRMR=0.013. The model demonstrated a good fit, with all paths being significant, and all fit indices meeting the requirements. Parent-child attachment negatively predicted interpersonal harmony, suggesting that lower interpersonal relationship disturbance, correlated with more harmonious interpersonal relationship, positively predicting interpersonal harmony ($\beta=-0.202$, $P<0.001$), which validated hypothesis 1. Parent-child attachment negatively predicted psychological boundary ($\beta=-0.169$, $P<0.001$). Moreover, parent-child attachment negatively predicted psychological boundary ($\beta=0.284$, $P<0.001$), which validated hypothesis 2; besides, parent-child attachment positively correlated with cognitive flexibility ($\beta=0.272$, $P<0.001$), while cognitive

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of variables
Таблица 1. Описательная статистика и корреляционный анализ переменных

	<i>M±SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1	1.49±0.50	1				
2	1.45±0.50	-0.220***	1			
3	3.71±0.74	0.125**	-0.126**	1		
4	3.30±0.65	-0.168***	0.169***	-0.199***	1	
5	3.42±0.47	-0.144***	-0.143***	0.266***	0.017	1
6	0.40±0.25	-0.215***	0.235***	-0.347***	0.363***	-0.256***

Note. * $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, *** $P < 0.001$. 1 – sex; 2 – class leader experience; 3 – parent-child attachment; 4 – psychological boundary; 5 – cognitive flexibility; 6 – interpersonal harmony.

Примечание. * $P < 0,05$, ** $P < 0,01$, *** $P < 0,001$. 1 – пол; 2 – опыт лидера группы; 3 – детско-родительская привязанность; 4 – психологическая граница; 5 – когнитивная гибкость; 6 – межличностная гармония.

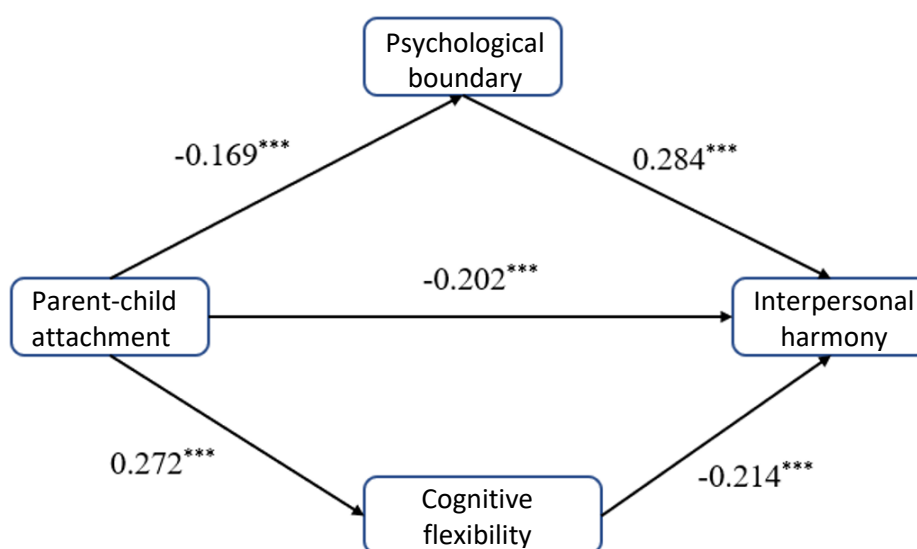


Fig. 1. Relationship model of parent-child attachment, psychological boundary, cognitive flexibility and interpersonal harmony

Рис. 1. Модель связи детско-родительской привязанности, психологической границы, когнитивной гибкости и межличностной гармонии

flexibility negatively correlated with interpersonal relationship. Hypothesis 3 was validated by the negative correlation between the degree of interpersonal relationship distress and interpersonal harmony ($\beta = -0.214$, $P < 0.001$), indicating that the lower the level of distress, the higher the level of harmony in interpersonal relationships. Therefore, psychological boundary and cognitive flexibility simultaneously mediated the relationship between parent-child attachment and interpersonal harmony.

As shown in Table 2, using the Bootstrap test in Mplus 7.4 with 1000 replicates and calculating 95 % confidence intervals, the parallel mediating effect of mental boundaries and cognitive flexibility was significant, with a total indirect effect value of -0.106 . Specifically, the parallel mediating effect was generated through two mediating

chains: First, indirect path 1 was composed of parent-child attachment \rightarrow psychological boundary \rightarrow interpersonal harmony, the 95 % confidence interval of Bootstrap was $[-0.080; -0.022]$, the standardized effect value was -0.048 , and the interval did not include 0, indicating that the mediating effect of the psychological boundary was significant. Second, indirect path 2 comprised parent-child attachment \rightarrow cognitive flexibility \rightarrow interpersonal harmony, with a 95 % confidence interval of $[-0.095; -0.034]$ and a standardized effect value of -0.058 . Given that the interval value did not include 0, the mediating effect of cognitive flexibility was significant. To sum up, we established a parallel mediating model of psychological boundary, and cognitive flexibility to examine the relationship between parent-child attachment and interpersonal harmony.

Table 2. Mediating effect analysis
Таблица 2. Анализ эффекта опосредования

Predictor	Standardization effect	Proportion of effect	BC 95 % CI	
			Lower	Upper
Parent-child attachment → psychological boundary	-0.202	65.58 %	-0.292	-0.105
Parent-child attachment → psychological boundary → interpersonal harmony	-0.048	15.58 %	-0.080	-0.022
Parent-child attachment → cognitive flexibility → interpersonal harmony	-0.058	18.83 %	-0.095	-0.034
Parent-child attachment → interpersonal harmony total mediating effect	-0.308	100 %	-0.387	-0.210

Note. * $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, *** $P < 0.001$. BC 95 % CI is bias-corrected 95 % confidence intervals.

Примечание. * $P < 0,05$, ** $P < 0,01$, *** $P < 0,001$. BC 95 % CI – поправка на систематическую погрешность 95 % доверительных интервалов.

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to investigate the mechanism by which parent-child attachment impacts the interpersonal harmony of adolescents. Accordingly, the Interpersonal Comprehensive Diagnostic Scale was used to quantify the level of interpersonal disturbance among vocational students, which was subsequently used as an indicator to account for their interpersonal harmony. The current study explored the parallel mediating mechanism of psychological boundary, and cognitive flexibility, between parent-child attachment and interpersonal harmony among adolescents. The results showed that psychological boundary and cognitive flexibility play a parallel mediating role between parent-child attachment and interpersonal harmony. The mediation model refines the current understanding of the relationship mechanism between parent-child attachment, and interpersonal harmony, and offers guidance for interventions and educational support for adolescents to establish harmonious interpersonal relationships, promoting the development of adolescents.

Consistent with the literature [37], our study found that parent-child attachment of adolescents was a positive predictor of interpersonal harmony and validated that parent-child attachment level could positively predict the interpersonal harmony of adolescents (hypothesis 1) The interpersonal theory of attachment theory suggests that attachment results from long-term evolution, which will affect the expression of individual interpersonal social function [38]. In addition, the parent-child relationship is the basis of the attachment relationship, and the safe base script formed during the interaction between individuals and parents or main caregivers, can reportedly help individuals deal with threatening situations in proximity-seeking ways, that is, individuals with good parent-child attachment experience, may be more willing to seek help from their parents or main caregivers [39]. On the contrary, individuals with poor parent-child attachment experience are more likely to maintain a cold and unfriendly attitude in interpersonal relationships [40], and are more likely to adopt a negative way of dealing with interpersonal relationships [41]. This result supports attachment theory and ecosystem theory and fur-

ther suggests that parents should create a warm and harmonious family atmosphere, and establish harmonious parent-child relationships in family education, which is more beneficial to developing children's interpersonal relationships.

Moreover, the present study found that parent-child attachment could indirectly affect interpersonal harmony through psychological boundaries; that is, the higher the parent-child attachment security, the thicker the psychological boundaries, the lower the interpersonal disturbance, and the higher the degree of interpersonal harmony, consistent with the literature, which validated that psychological boundary played a mediating role between parent-child attachment, and interpersonal harmony (hypothesis 2). Despite leaving their families to attend university, high vocational students are still influenced by the parent-child relationship model established with their parents. Which can affect their psychosocial adaptation and the establishment of personal boundaries [42]. In other words, the higher the parent-child attachment security, the clearer the individual's psychological boundaries, and the clearer the awareness of the surrounding space and group identity [43], suggesting that they also respect each other, and maintain self-independence in interpersonal relationships, behave in a measured manner, and know how to refuse others. Conversely, the lower the attachment security, the more blurred the individual's psychological boundaries, or even no sense of boundaries. Therefore, psychological boundary plays a mediating role between parent-child attachment and interpersonal harmony among adolescents. This result supports the self-classification theory and system theory. The system theory holds that individual can be regarded as a bounded self-organizing system, which is called psychological boundary. The interaction between the self-organizing system and the environment depends on the psychological boundary for self-adjustment and control. It is widely thought that the individual's psychological boundary can be adjusted, and promoted during interaction with the environment [44]. Moreover, establishing clear self-boundaries is necessary and important, conducive to improving individual interpersonal harmony levels, and may further promote mental health [45]. On the contrary, if an individual ignores his own

needs to fulfil others, it is likely to cause negative emotions, or psychological problems due to the continuous consumption of psychological resources, and the continuous occupation of psychological space. Parents need to give students full respect while giving them emotional support, allowing the sufficient personal space, refraining from controlling their thoughts, and maintaining appropriate boundaries [46].

In addition, parent-child attachment can indirectly affect interpersonal harmony through cognitive flexibility; that is, the higher the parent-child attachment security, the stronger the cognitive flexibility, the lower the degree of interpersonal disturbance, and the better the degree of interpersonal harmony, validating that cognitive flexibility mediates the relationship between parent-child attachment and interpersonal harmony (hypothesis 3). It has been established that the psychological and emotional resources of the family are the prerequisite for the good development of children [14], and secure attachment fosters positive self-cognition and independent adaptation [47]. Besides, the theory of expansion and construction holds that positive emotions can expand individual consciousness, promote creativity, and develop complex psychological functions [24]. In addition, adverse childhood experiences can affect the maturation of cognitive flexibility in adolescents, and these effects can persist into adulthood [30], and cognitive flexibility can positively predict interpersonal harmony. Therefore, cognitive flexibility plays a mediating role in parent-child attachment, and interpersonal harmony among adolescents, which the individual-environment interaction model can also explain. Specifically, the model proposes that individual behaviour results from the interaction between the individual and the environment, and when the relationship between variables in the environment is positive and beneficial, the individual will also develop, in a positive and healthy direction [48]. Accordingly, the secure parent-child attachment established by parents and children may help the family environment to develop in a positive direction, promote the development of cognitive flexibility as an individual characteristic [49], and further enhance the willingness and ability of children to respond flexibly in interpersonal situations and solve interpersonal problems from multiple perspectives [50]. Mindfulness meditation courses can help adolescents master the principles and techniques of mindfulness meditation, practice mindfulness meditation, improve executive control function, and then promote cognitive flexibility [51].

Finally, based on the literature, this study explored the impact of parent-child attachment on interpersonal harmony, and substantiated that psychological boundaries and cognitive flexibility play a parallel mediating role. However, in addition to the mediating variables in this study, there may be other mediating variables, and psychological boundaries are inseparable from concepts such as resilience and self [52], while cognitive flexibility is closely related to value orientation and intergenerational conflict [53]. Therefore, follow-up studies can further explore the role of these variables in the relationship between parent-child attachment and interpersonal harmony. In addition, this study has some shortcomings that should be addressed, such as sample representativeness. To explore the factors that impact interpersonal harmony in adolescents, it is essential to adopt a comprehensive approach that involves gathering input from multiple sources, including parents, teachers, and classmates via multidimensional reporting and analysis methods.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Parent-child attachment negatively predicted interpersonal harmony.
2. Psychological boundary and cognitive flexibility play parallel mediating roles between parent-child attachment and interpersonal harmony.

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Возможен ли перенос модели отношений? Влияние детско-родительской привязанности на характер межличностных отношений подростков

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Аннотация: На основе теории привязанности и теории экосистем в работе исследовано влияние детско-родительской привязанности на характер межличностных отношений подростков, а также механизм психологических границ и когнитивной гибкости. В исследовании приняли участие 505 подростков, из них 51,5 % юношей. Использовались опросник детско-родительской привязанности, опросник психологических границ, опросник

когнитивной гибкости и комплексной диагностической шкалы межличностных отношений. Результаты: выявлена отрицательная взаимосвязь между показателями «Детско-родительская привязанность» и «Межличностная гармония». Другими словами, чем выше уровень детско-родительской привязанности, тем ниже уровень межличностных нарушений и тем гармоничнее межличностные отношения. Психологические границы и когнитивная гибкость играют посредническую роль между детско-родительской привязанностью и межличностной гармонией соответственно. Эффект посредничества составил 15,58 и 18,83 % от общего эффекта соответственно. Результаты подтверждают модель параллельного посредничества показателей «психологическая граница» и «когнитивная гибкость» между показателями «детско-родительская привязанность» и «межличностная гармония».

Ключевые слова: детско-родительская привязанность; психологическая граница; когнитивная гибкость; межличностная гармония; подростки.

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