

Empathy, prosocial behavior and security of attachment in two years olds

Doris Bischof-Köhler

Abstract

Empathy, the ability to vicariously comprehend the emotional state of another person, develops in the middle of the second year, when children have formed a self-concept that allows them to recognize themselves in a mirror. In previous investigations we demonstrated that most recognizers showed concern and tried to help when confronted with a person in need, whereas non-recognizers showed a perplexed or indifferent reaction. Since there were also some recognizers who remained indifferent, the question arose as to whether security of attachment influenced their empathic response. This question was investigated with 39 children at the age of 22 to 23 months, whose security of attachment had been determined some months previously by the Strange Situation. The investigation yielded significant associations between attachment type and response in the empathy experiment. The majority of insecurely attached children did not react empathetically. In the theoretical framework of the Zurich Model of Motivation, the hypothesis is put forward that the behavior of insecure avoidant children, both generally as well as in an empathy arousing situation, is caused by a fixation on accommodative coping strategies, which can be specified as acclimatization and revision. In contrast, insecure ambivalent children tend rather to rely on assimilative coping.

Keywords: Empathy, prosocial behavior, security of attachment, Zurich model of social motivation