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Short Communication

Biological stress reactivity as an index of the two polarities of the experience model

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ABSTRACT

The two-polarities model of personality argues that experience is organized around two axes: *interpersonal relatedness* and *self-definition*. Differential emphasis on one of these poles defines adaptive and pathological experiences, generating anaclitic or introjective tendencies. The anaclitic pattern, on one hand, has been conceptually related with an exaggerated emphasis on interpersonal relatedness. On the other hand, the introjective pattern has been connected to high levels of self-criticism. The aim of this study was to investigate the psychophysiological basis for this relationship. Specifically, we hypothesized that the anaclitic individual should have a higher biological reactivity to stress (BRS), measured by the cortisol concentration in saliva, in an interpersonal stress induction protocol (Trier Social Stress Test). Contrary to what was expected, the results indicated that introjective participants presented a higher BSR than the anaclitic group. Interestingly, in contrast to their higher BSR, the introjective group reported a diminished subjective stress in relation to the average. In the anaclitic group, a tendency that goes in the opposite direction was found. Theoretical implications of these findings were discussed.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the two polarities of the personality model have developed a significant empirical and theoretical corpus (Luyten et al., 2013). This approach, originally proposed by Blatt (1974) has identified that human personality development involves the harmonious and balanced interaction of two polarities of experience (onward: POE): *interpersonal relatedness* and *self-definition* (Blatt, 1974; Blatt and Luyten, 2009). These two elemental aspects that structure experience are related to building significant and protective interpersonal relations and developing an integrated and differentiated concept of identity (Luyten and Blatt, 2013). Consequently, personality organization is conformed in relation to a dialectic interaction of these two poles, resulting in different character styles. On one side, *anaclitic* character is related with interpersonal relatedness, describing a collectively oriented style, with

an emphasis on intimacy, love, and intersubjectivity. On the other hand, *introjective* character is associated with self-definition, which implies an autonomous style, giving value to agency, achievement, and initiative (Blatt, 2008).

The two-polarities model has developed substantial clinical applications, where psychopathology has been conceptualized as a maladaptive emphasis toward one of the two poles in relation to the other (Blatt and Luyten, 2009). Therefore, the unbalance on one of these polarities of experience has been considered a diathesis that may evolve in affective and cognitive disorders. In this context, an important application field has been related to studies on depression, where an anaclitic and an introjective dimension of this clinical condition has been differentiated.¹

It has been widely accepted that a relevant element in personality configuration and its deviated pathways is stress sensitivity and

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