Attachment and relationships: Milestones and future directions

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──────────── ABSTRACT ────────────

Adult attachment researchers have made important strides during the past 25 years in testing and applying attachment theory to multiple personal and interpersonal domains. We highlight some of the major milestones and then propose several directions for future research. Some of the most important and promising directions include testing additional normative processes implied by attachment theory, developing and testing critical connections between attachment theory and other major interpersonal theories, and identifying pathways between attachment processes and long-term health outcomes.

KEY WORDS: Attachment • health • individual differences • normative processes

Bowlby (1969) theorized that there were four interrelated behavioral systems that govern human behavior – attachment, caregiving, exploration, and sex. Of these, Bowlby recognized the attachment system, which motivates children and adults to seek safety and security through close contact with attachment figures, as being of primary importance in regulating the other systems. During the past two decades, a great deal of research has been devoted to understanding the attachment behavioral system. Most of this research has focused on attachment styles – relatively stable individual difference variables – and their assessment in adults.

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Major milestones

There are two watershed developments in the attachment literature that we consider to have achieved milestone status. The first is the testing of the prototype hypothesis, which verifies a central proposition from attachment theory that experiences in earlier relationships ought to have an effect on later relationships. The second involves verification of Bowlby's posited interrelations between the attachment system and each of the other three behavioral systems.

Perhaps the most central proposition of attachment theory is the proto-type hypothesis. This hypothesis holds that experiences in early close rela-tionships create internal working models that then influence cognition, affect, and behavior in relationships that involve later attachment figures. These working models comprise not only memories of experiences with earlier attachment figures; they also affect views of later attachment figures, attitudes and beliefs about attachment, conditional ("if/then") rules that guide behavior, attachment goals, and procedural knowledge related to goal attainment. Longitudinal studies provide strong support for this hypothesis (Grossmann, Grossmann, & Waters, 2005; Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007). Adult attachment research adds to this body of research by showing that more avoidant and more anxious people are characterized by a variety of dysfunctional relationship thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, which in turn lead them and their partners to be less satisfied (Feeney, 2008). For example, more anxiously attached adults tend to underestimate the avail-ability of support from their attachment figures (Collins & Feeney, 2004). This contributes to greater relationship dissatisfaction and more dysfunc-tional security-seeking behaviors (e.g., chronic reassurance-seeking; Shaver, Schachner, & Mikulincer, 2005), which further alienates their romantic partners (Simpson, 1990).

A second milestone is the mounting evidence supporting Bowlby's (1969) view that four key behavioral systems are interrelated, with the attachment system playing a significant role in orchestrating the other three systems. For example, the caregiving literature indicates that more avoidantly and more anxiously attached people offer care in different ways with regard to both quantity and quality (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992; Westmaas & Silver, 2001). More avoidant people provide less support to partners in general than do less avoidant ones. In addition, the caregiving provided by highly avoidant individuals tends to lack sensitivity, physical comfort, and nurturance, whereas the caregiving offered by highly anxious persons is more controlling and intrusive (Feeney & Collins, 2004). Furthermore, the motives behind caregiving differ as a function of attachment styles. More secure people, for example, tend to provide care for more altruistic reasons, more avoidant persons offer care for egoistic reasons, and more anxious individuals provide care to strengthen bonds between themselves and their partners (Collins, Guichard, Ford, & Feeney, 2006; Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005).

With regard to sexuality, more avoidant individuals engage in intimate sexual activities less often, consistent with their desire to maintain greater

emotional distance and to avoid situations that might create intimacy (Brassard, Shaver, & Lussier, 2007; Tracy, Shaver, Albino, & Cooper, 2003). More avoidant people, however, are also more likely to engage in casual, un-committed sex devoid of emotional intimacy (Schmitt, 2005). The findings for highly anxious persons are more complex. Men who are higher in anxiety typically engage in sexual activities less often than do their more secure counterparts, but highly anxious women do not. However, members of both sexes who are higher in anxiety engage in sexual activities to feel loved, avoid rejection, and strengthen their more tenuous attachment bonds (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a). Thus, the sexuality findings indicate that rela-tionship orientations associated with adult attachment styles carry over into the sexual sphere.

The impact of the attachment system on the exploratory system, another innate system that is geared toward investigation and mastery of the environ-ment, is a relatively new topic in the attachment literature. Nevertheless, the small body of research on exploration paints a clear picture of inhibi-tion of exploration by insecurely attached people. Highly avoidant and highly anxious people, for instance, report less interest in exploration (Green & Campbell, 2000). After engaging in exploratory activities, they report less enjoyment and greater anxiety (Martin, Paetzold, & Rholes, 2009). In addition, more avoidant people report being less curious (Mikulincer, 1997), and both more avoidant and more anxious people display more cognitive closure. These and related findings demonstrate the impact of the attach-ment system on the exploration system, as Bowlby (1969) anticipated. Lacking emotional security and having less ability to control their emotions is likely to make novel information and challenges seem overwhelming to insecurely attached people.

Future directions

In our view, there are several promising directions for adult attachment research in the next decade, only a few of which can be highlighted here. From our perspective, the most noteworthy directions fall into three con-ceptual categories: examining additional normative processes proposed by Bowlby or implied by recent extensions of attachment theory, developing and testing links between attachment theory and other major interpersonal theories, and pinpointing biological pathways between attachment processes and long-term health outcomes.

Normative processes

Several scholars have suggested that greater attention needs to be directed toward testing core normative principles of attachment theory (e.g., Miku-lincer & Shaver, 2007a; Simpson & Rholes, 2004). Although inroads have been made (e.g., Hazan's WHOTO work, Feeney's circle of security work, Mikulincer & Shaver's security priming work), the field remains focused on

studying how individual differences in adult attachment styles affect assorted relationship processes and outcomes. During the next decade, more concentrated attention should be devoted to core normative processes underlying the attachment system, especially with regard to attachment figures other than parents or romantic partners (e.g., close friends, siblings, mentors and mentees). For example, we still know remarkably little about how people become attached to others, that is, how others come to serve proximity-maintenance, safe-haven, and secure-base functions for certain people. We also know little about why and how bonafide attachment relationships end for reasons other than death or permanent separations such as having to move away. Along these lines, we also need to understand more about how attachment relationships differ from close relationships that do not serve proximity-seeking, safe-haven, or secure-base functions.

Answering these questions will most likely hinge on understanding more about how the caregiving system interfaces with and operates in conjunction with the attachment system (George & Solomon, 2008). What happens, for example, when adult children care for their sick and elderly parents? Is the type, amount, or quality of care provided by the adult children of elderly parents guided by how they (adult children) were treated by their parents earlier in life? Alternately, is it guided primarily by other models that exist within one's hierarchy of attachment figures (Collins & Read, 1994; Overall, Fletcher, & Friesen, 2003)? More generally, how are attachment experiences earlier in life related to how adult children interact on a daily basis with their elderly parents, especially when they require considerable care? (See Cicirelli, 2010.)

Another critical set of questions centers on how the hierarchy of attachment figures operates, especially when individuals are distressed, seek proximity, and require a safe haven. Collins and Read (1994) proposed that people have a hierarchy of attachment working models, with general models subsuming models for different types of attachment relationships (e.g., those with parents, romantic partners, close friends), which subsume models of specific people (e.g., one's mother, father, current romantic partner, best friend). One important line of future inquiry will be to clarify when specific models become activated and guide social behavior.

Wilson, Lindsey, and Schooler (2000) claim that individuals possess both explicit attitudes (those they currently hold) and implicit attitudes (those they once held but that have been supplanted by current ones). Current attitudes (such as working models of current attachment figures in adulthood) typically guide how individuals think, feel, and behave when they are not distracted, distressed, or overly challenged. When they are distressed or dysregulated, however, individuals are more inclined to act on their implicit attitudes (such as working models associated with past attachment figures), which presumably have been "written over." This model could be used by attachment theorists to determine when individuals should be more likely to behave with reference to their working models of past attachment relationships versus current attachment relationships (for an example, see Simpson, Winterheld, Rholes, & Oriña, 2007).

Finally, we in the adult attachment field must develop normative models that specify how *both* partners in an attachment relationship affect one another, particularly in attachment-relevant situations. Bowlby, for example, said very little about how one's *partner's* attachment history or style ought to influence outcomes for the individual or the two people's relationship. Even if an individual is securely attached, the way he or she thinks, feels, and behaves within a relationship should be contingent on whether the partner is secure, avoidant, or anxious. Theoretically, there ought to be situations in which even insecure individuals behave in more "secure" ways, and we already have some evidence that there are. For example, despite the fact that more anxious individuals tend to behave less constructively during relationship-threatening discussions, if their partners are more committed to the relationship, highly anxious individuals report feeling less rejected and more accepted in accommodation interactions, and they also behave more constructively (Tran & Simpson, 2009).

Connections with other major theories

Another significant direction for future research is to clarify how major principles of attachment theory intersect with core concepts of other major theories of relationship processes. Some important research along these lines has already been conducted, most notably by Mikulincer and Shaver (2007b), who have begun to link principles of attachment theory with Fredrickson's (2001) Broaden and Build model of positive emotions. Much more theoretical and empirical work is still needed, however, to tie attachment theory with other major theories, including Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1982), Terror Management Theory (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999), and especially Interdependence Theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). With respect to Interdependence Theory, for example, we need to achieve a better understanding of how people who possess different attachment histories and styles "transform motivation" in different kinds of situations. How, for instance, do secure individuals resist the temptation to strike back when their partners display potentially relationship-damaging acts? Both cognitively and emotionally, how do they maintain a pro-relationship, accommodating, and forgiving orientation when faced with repeated partner transgressions? What kinds of transgressions lead secure people to terminate relationships, and how do they cope with and eventually rebound from major betrayals?

At a more general level, how does greater relationship interdependence and commitment affect the ways in which insecurely attached people orient to and act within their relationships over time? Although we know that greater dependence on a partner buffers avoidant people from acting badly toward their partners when they are afraid or upset (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Rholes, 2001) and that greater partner commitment buffers anxious people from behaving destructively in accommodation discussions with their partners (Tran & Simpson, 2009), we do not know whether or

how these partner and relationship constructs, which are central to Inter-dependence Theory, may lead insecurely attached people to become more secure over time. Bowlby believed that attachment styles should change in patterned and predictable ways in response to how people are treated by attachment figures across different phases of social development. Core constructs in Interdependence Theory may provide important clues about what is likely to help "pull" insecurely attached people toward greater attachment security in relationships.

Attachment and health

Attachment theory and research should focus on how the emotion-regulation and coping strategies associated with secure, avoidant, and anxious attach-ment "get under the skin" to influence long-term health outcomes, both positively and negatively. For example, emerging evidence indicates that suppression, which is a cardinal feature of the avoidant coping style, and hypervigilance and rumination, which are hallmarks of anxious attachment, result in chronic health problems beginning at a relatively young age (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007a). Most of the evidence with respect to attach-ment styles per se, however, has been indirect. Not only do we need to know whether insecure attachment predicts deleterious health outcomes (and if so, which ones it predicts) and whether secure attachment predicts better health outcomes; we also need to identify the biological pathways that connect different patterns of coping and emotion regulation to specific long-term health outcomes (for some possibilities, see Miller, Chen, & Cole, 2009).

Finally, recent experimental research has shown that priming people with security-related words or thoughts induces greater security and, in turn, more prosocial behavior toward both ingroup and outgroup members, regardless of a person's chronic attachment style (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007b). Questions still remain, however, about how long-lasting experi-mental security-enhancing interventions are and whether they could be strengthened to promote more permanent changes in attachment security, prosocial behavior, and perhaps even better health outcomes.

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