Continuity and Change in Patterns of Attachment between Adolescence and Early Adulthood in a High Risk Sample

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BACKGROUND

• While studies have established empirical support for continuity of attachment classifications between infancy and early adulthood (Hamilton, 2000; Waters, Merrick, et al., 2000), questions remain regarding patterns of attachment continuity and change between these developmental periods.

• Previous research has demonstrated that negative attachment-related life events are associated with changes in attachment classification over time. For instance, composite measures of negative attachment-relevant life events have been found to be related to changes from security to insecurity in studies examining concordance in attachment between infancy and young adulthood (Hamilton, 2000; Waters, Merrick, et al., 2000).

• Researchers have proposed that there may be transformations in internal working models as a result of developmental tasks faced in adolescence (Weinfield, Strouf, & Egeland, 2000).

• For example, achievement of autonomy from caregivers may allow adolescents, especially those who have experienced harsh caregiving, the opportunity to evaluate and transform internal working models of attachment (Allen & Land, 1999; Waters, Hamilton, & Weinfield, 2000).

• Additionally, through interactions with peers and romantic partners, adolescents may be exposed to new relationship experiences that are potential divergent from earlier relationship experiences with attachment figures, which may initiate transformation in the internal working model.

PARTICIPANTS

• Participants were 163 individuals (82 male, 81 female) drawn from the Minnesota Parent-Child Project, a longitudinal study of children raised in low SES households and at risk for poor developmental outcomes.

• Sixty-seven percent of the participants were Caucasian, 18% were of mixed race (African-American and Caucasian), 10% were African-American, and 5% were of other racial backgrounds.

• The first research goal was to examine the association between state of mind regarding attachment at ages 19 and 26. Results demonstrated significant correspondence between adolescent and young adult AAI classifications, across three categories, χ²(9) = 14.81, p = .005, and four category, χ²(19) = 30.43, p = .001, classification schemes (see Tables 1 and 2).

• The second goal was to examine correlates of continuity and change in attachment classification between ages 19 and 26 (see Table 3). For instance, composite measures of negative attachment-relevant life events have been found to be related to changes from security to insecurity in studies examining concordance in attachment between infancy and young adulthood (Hamilton, 2000; Waters, Merrick, et al., 2000).

• Participants who transitioned from insecurity to security on the AAI were rated as having higher quality romantic relationships at age 23 than participants with stable insecure AAI classifications, t(48) = 2.60, p = .01, d = .71. Participants with stable secure AAI classifications received marginally higher ratings of romantic relationship quality at age 23 than participants who switched from secure to insecure AAI classifications, t(19) = 1.86, p < .10, d = .71.

• Participants who switched from a secure to an insecure attachment classification between ages 19 and 26 reported greater life stress than participants who retained a secure attachment classification, t(42) = -2.21, p = .05, d = .50.

• Participants who transitioned from insecurity to security on the AAI were rated as having higher quality romantic relationships at age 23 than participants with stable insecure AAI classifications, t(48) = 2.60, p = .01, d = .75. Participants with stable secure AAI classifications received marginally higher ratings of romantic relationship quality at age 23 than participants who switched from secure to insecure AAI classifications, t(19) = 1.86, p < .10, d = .71.

• Consistent with previous findings linking more positive romantic relationships with earned-security on the AAI (Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 2002; Roisman, Padron, & Sroufe, 2002), the current results suggest that participation in a supportive romantic relationship may provide individuals with opportunities to experience a different type of secure-base relationship, which in turn may promote changes toward a more state of mind regarding attachment (Weinfield, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004).

• Consistent with previous findings from this sample (Weinfield et al., 2004), exposure to greater amounts of life stress was correlated with a transition from security to insecurity in young adulthood.

MEASURES

• Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996). The AAI was administered to participants shortly following their 19th and 26th birthdays. Interview transcripts were assigned one of four major classifications: autonomous, dismissing, preoccupied, or unresolved.

• Life Stress. Participants’ life stress was assessed via self-report measures at ages 19, 23, and 26. At age 19, participants were administered the Adolescent Life Events Scale (ALES). At age 23 and 26, participants were administered the Life Events Inventory (Egeland & Deinard, 1977). Scores for the ALES and Life Events Inventory were converted to z-scores and averaged across time points to derive an average life stress score.

• Living Circumstances. At age 19 and age 26, participants were interviewed about their current living situation. As a part of these interviews, participants were asked about whom they currently resided. Responses to these questions were examined to identify those participants who lived with an attachment figure at age 19 but not at age 26.

• Quality of Relationship. At age 19, participants were asked about their non-romantic, best friend relationship. Participants were asked about their perceived closeness, level of intimacy, negative interactions, and overall relationship satisfaction with their best friend. Based on interview responses, ratings of Friendship Security and Overall Friendship Quality were assessed using 7-point rating scales.

• Quality of Romantic Relationships. At age 19 and 23, participants currently involved in steady romantic relationships were interviewed about their relationship with their partner. Based on participants’ responses to the 19-year interview questions, Romantic Attachment Security and Overall Romantic Relationship Quality were assessed using 7-point rating scales. The ratings for the two scales were averaged together to derive a composite age 19 romantic relationship rating. Participants’ responses to the 23-year relationship interview questions were rated according to 5-point scales of Romantic Attachment Security and Overall Romantic Relationship Quality. Ratings for the two scales were averaged together to derive a composite age 23 romantic relationship rating.

RESULTS

• The first research goal was to examine the association between state of mind regarding attachment at ages 19 and 26. Results demonstrated significant correspondence between adolescent and young adult AAI classifications, across three categories, χ²(9) = 14.81, p = .005, and four category, χ²(19) = 30.43, p = .001, classification schemes (see Tables 1 and 2).

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REFERENCES


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