

PARENTAL HISTORY AND CURRENT ATTACHMENT

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have looked at how parental attachment is related to several dimensions such as parental divorce or family structure, romantic relationships including intimacy, emotional adjustment, and overall psychological well-being. These studies have found that having a secure parental attachment is beneficial. The following study attempted to discover if there was a correlation between an individual's parental history and their current romantic attachment. Seventy Introduction to Psychology students completed the Experience in Close Relationships Scale-Revised (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) and a parental history survey (Kearney & Baron, 2003), plus additional items. Romantic attachment was significantly related to being in a current relationship of more than 6 months duration. Romantic attachment styles were not found to be significantly related to continued family stressors, parental divorce or remarriage, hostile arguing among family members or parental depression.

When we are young we develop an attachment to our parents or caregivers. Attachment is defined as an affectional bond to another person. Ainsworth (1989) describes an affectional bond as a relatively long lasting bond in which the partner is important as a unique individual and is not interchangeable. There is a need to maintain closeness. Being within proximity of the partner and interacting creates great joy and pleasure. It may be sustained over time and distances and when absences occur the person may become distressed and permanent loss would cause grief. Affectional bonds depend upon the individual and entail representation in the internal organization of the individual person. A person can have more than one attachment as they move on from their original secure base. The person begins to develop bonds with peers, siblings, kin, and later with a romantic partner.

Attachment is a primitive behavior which ensures the survival of the baby. The attachment develops presumably as a result of the mother's responsiveness to the child's needs. Ainsworth (1989) states that throughout the first year the infant gradually builds up expectations of regularities in what happens to him or her. A few examples would be: sleep-wake cycles, feeding, and comfort, such as face-to-face interaction and holding the infant. If the child's needs are not met or there is no consistency in their schedule the child may begin to feel insecure in that they do not know what to expect from their environment. As a result, the child develops expectations of his or her environment. For example, the child will come to the expectation that if he or she cries the caregiver will either respond or not respond. Therefore, the infant begins to develop an internal working model of what he or she can anticipate from the surroundings. These surroundings will either be consistent and comforting or unstable and cold. Ainsworth (1989) describes attachment as an inner organization, presumably rooted in neurophysiological processes. It is subject to developmental change, not only because it is under genetic guidance but also because it is sensitive to environmental influences.

Ainsworth (1979) observed the interaction between a mother and her infant, who was at least one year old, during a separation episode and reunion. She observed three distinct patterns that she referred to as A, B, and C babies. Group B, securely attached babies, viewed their mother as a secure base from which they could explore their surroundings. These babies became distressed when the mother left and upon her return wanted contact or interaction with her. Group C babies showed some signs of anxiety even in the pre-separation episodes. The babies

also became intensely distressed when the mother left, but when the mother returned they were ambivalent, seeking close contact with her and yet resisting contact or interaction. Group A babies rarely cried in the separation episodes and during the reunion episodes tended to avoid or ignore the mother.

Griffin and Bartholomew (1994) looked at two underlying measures that predict the type of attachment one has. The two underlying measures are the internal working models of the self and other. Depending on how an individual views them, the models of self and others will predict one of four attachments: secure (those who have a positive self model and positive other model); preoccupied (those who have negative self model and positive other model); dismissing (those who have a positive self model and negative other model); and fearful (those who have a negative self model and negative other model).

Those who have a secure attachment are comfortable depending on others and letting others depend upon them (Hazen & Shaver, 1987). Those who are secure do not need to depend on others for fulfillment of their needs. They have a sense of worthiness (lovability) plus an expectation that other people are generally accepting and responsive (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Those with a secure attachment style are more likely to be in a current romantic relationship (Walker & Ehrenberg, 1998).

Those who have a preoccupied style have a sense of unworthiness (unlovability) combined with a positive evaluation of others. This would lead the person to strive for self-acceptance by gaining the acceptance of valued others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). They become distressed when their intimacy needs are not met (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994).

The third attachment style is dismissive or avoidant, which refers to those who have a sense of love-worthiness combined with a negative disposition toward other people (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Ainsworth (1979) characterized avoidance as a defensive maneuver. Lessening the anxiety and anger experienced in the strange situation experiment enabled the child to remain within a tolerable range of proximity to the mother. Those with a dismissive attachment style tend to avoid close relationships to protect themselves against disappointment and they maintain a sense of independence and invulnerability (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

The fourth style, fearful, is identified having a sense of unworthiness (unlovability) combined with an expectation that others will be negatively disposed towards them (untrustworthy and rejecting). As a result, these people will avoid relationships to protect themselves against anticipated rejection by others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Love is an attachment process and is experienced differently by different people because of variations in their attachment histories (Hazen & Shaver, 1987). There are a few studies that look at the type of parental attachment one has had and the effect it has on the person. For example, Engels, Finkenauer, Meeus, and Dekovic (2001) found that those who were strongly attached to their parents reported higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of depression. They also found that those same people reported less anxiety in performing social skills, such as negotiation, giving and receiving critiques, and giving positive feedback on others' performances. Not only did they have less anxiety but they also performed these social skills more frequently. Engels et al. believed that these social skills are learned from the parents and are necessary for the initiation and maintenance of warm, satisfying, and reciprocal relationships with friends and romantic partners. On the other hand, Overbeek, Engels, Meeus, and Vollebergh (2003) found that higher levels of depressive mood, psychological stress, and dissatisfaction with life were associated with less parental care and more parental overprotection.

Another area related to attachment that has been extensively looked at has been the effects of parental divorce. For example, Love and Murdock (2004) found that attachment was a significant predictor of children's well-being after divorce. Individuals from intact families

reported more secure attachment compared to step-families even when they controlled for family conflict, meaning that conflict would not have any effect on the attachment measured. In slight contrast though, Lopez, Melendez, and Rice (2000) found that those whose custodial parent remarried were more likely to report a secure attachment style than those whose custodial parent remained single.

A few studies have actually found that it is not the divorce itself that causes an insecure attachment style but rather the conflict between the parents; or in other words, the perceived quality of the parents' marital relationship (Ensign, Scherman, & Clark, 1998; Walker & Ehrenberg, 1998; Lopez et. al, 2000). Walker and Ehrenberg (1998) found in their study that the majority of young people who experienced their parents' divorce had a fearful attachment style. It became even more significant in their study when the young person viewed overt anger as leading to their parents' marital breakdowns. Walker and Ehrenberg (1998) also found that current relationship status was significantly related to attachment style. Those who had a secure attachment were more likely to endorse current involvement in romantic relationships than were adolescents with insecure attachment styles. Hazan and Shaver (1987) found in their study that secure individuals' relationships tended to endure longer compared to insecure individuals.

It is obvious that having a secure attachment has many benefits, but what exactly causes a person to have an insecure attachment? Many researchers have looked at the type of attachment a person has with their parent or in certain situations such as divorce or hostile arguing. The current research seeks to go beyond that and looks at several different risk factors in the parental history and the effect these may or may not have on the young adult children and their romantic attachment.

This study looks at different aspects of stress that parents may incur while raising their children. The manner in which the parent effectively or ineffectively handles pressures within his or her life is likely to have a direct effect on the children. Insecure attachment styles may develop as children see from their parents that getting close to someone can hurt them emotionally. Children may see that opening up to someone puts them at a risk of being taken advantage of.

Therefore, it is predicted that (1) those parents who have experienced many family hardships or changes will have adult children who have developed one of the three insecure romantic attachment styles. It is also predicted that (2) those whose parents divorced, then remarried, will have a secure romantic attachment style; (3) a) those whose parents divorced before they were eighteen and did not remarry will have an insecure romantic attachment style b) specifically, those whose parents divorced before they were eighteen and did not remarry will have a fearful romantic attachment style; (4) those who reported their parents engaged in hostile arguing will have an insecure romantic attachment style; (5) those whose parents were depressed will have a dismissive romantic attachment style; and (6) those who have a secure romantic attachment style will be in a current relationship.

Method

Participants

Seventy Introduction to Psychology students from the University of Wisconsin-Superior participated in the present study. Only those age 18 or older were asked to participate. The age range was 18-39 years with a mean of 21.64 (SD= 4.17) There were 32 (45.71%) males and 38 (54.29%) females who partook in the study.

Questionnaires

The Experience in Close Relationships Scale-Revised (ECR-R) by Fraley, Waller, and Brennan (2000) was used to identify the type of romantic attachment. It consists of 36 questions that are based on two scales: anxiety and avoidance. This questionnaire determines the type of

romantic attachment. For example the items included, “I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on romantic partners,” “I feel comfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings with my partner,” and “I worry a lot about my relationships.” The questions were to be answered based on the participants’ current romantic relationship. If they were not in one at the time of study they were then asked to answer the questions based on their most recent relationship. When Fraley et al. developed the ECR-R they looked at the four prominent scales that were used at that point in time to measure the types of attachment. They found that the original ECR scale, developed by Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998), had the best psychometric properties. Fraley et al. used the Item Response Theory to select items with optimal psychometric properties, meaning that the items accurately measured not only the high ends of the scales but also the low end of the dimensions as well. As a result they constructed better scales for measuring anxiety and avoidance. By doing so, they were able to increase the measurement precision by 50% to 100% without increasing the total number of items.

Two more recent studies have looked at the reliability and validity of the ECR-R and both found it to be a very reliable questionnaire (Sibley, Fischer, & Liu, 2005; Fairchild & Finney, 2006).

A second questionnaire was used to determine relevant aspects of the participants’ parental history. The questionnaire was developed by Kearney & Baron (2003) for the Research Consortium of Counseling and Psychological Service in Higher Education and consisted of 18 questions. The current study’s author also added 14 other questions that covered areas that the Kearney & Baron scale did not, such as, “If your parents divorced, did they remarry?,” “Did you live with a single parent?,” and “Are you in a current relationship and if so how long?” Included in the added questions were also demographic questions such as age and gender. When answering the questions the participants were asked to answer them in regard to the first 18 years of their life. It took approximately 10-12 minutes for the participants to complete both questionnaires.

Procedure

The researcher handed out the informed consent and the questionnaires in classrooms to those students who wished to participate. The participants were asked to fill out the questionnaires on their own time and bring them to the next class period. The informed consent and questionnaires went into separate folders so that the participants remained anonymous. Those who participated either received credit for participating in a research project, which is a requirement of the Introduction to Psychology classes, or if they had already fulfilled the requirement, they received extra credit.

Results

There were 49 (70%) individuals with a secure romantic attachment, 11 (15.71%) with preoccupied romantic attachments, 9 with a dismissing romantic attachment, and only one person who scored as fearful-avoidant. The one fearful-avoidant score was put into the dismissing romantic attachment category as that person scored higher on the avoidance scale than the anxiety scale. As a result, 10 (14.29%) participants were scored as having a dismissing romantic attachment. Thus 49 individuals scored in the secure romantic attachment category and 21 scored in the combined insecure romantic attachment group. The percentages are consistent with Hazen and Shaver (1987) results, where over half were secure and the other half split fairly evenly between the avoidant and anxious/ambivalent attachments. The results of the Parental History Questionnaire are shown in **Table 1., p.**

Prediction 1: Those who grew up with parents who have experienced family hardships or changes will have an insecure romantic attachment. A point was counted for each statement that

an individual answered “yes” to of the twenty-two items of the parental history questionnaire. If they answered “no” or “unsure,” the response was not counted. A t-test for unequal groups, secure and insecure, was used. The result was $t(68) = 0.45, p > .20$, a non-significant result.

Prediction 2: Those whose parents remarried will have a secure romantic attachment style. A 2x2 Chi Square analysis was used. The groups consisted of secure and insecure. There were 14 individuals with a secure attachment whose custodial parent remarried, while only four individuals with an insecure attachment had their custodial parent remarried. The result was $\chi^2(1) = 0.49, p < .90$, a non-significant result.

Prediction 3: A) Those whose parents divorced before they were 18 and did not remarry will have an insecure romantic attachment style. A 2x2 Chi Square Analysis was used. There were 22 individuals with a secure romantic attachment whose parents were divorced compared to only five insecure individuals. The result was $\chi^2(1) = 2.76, p < .10$, a non-significant result. B) Those whose parents divorced before they were 18 and did not remarry will have a fearful romantic attachment style. This hypothesis was not statistically tested as there was only one participant with a fearful-avoidant style. However, since 27 participants reported that their parents were divorced before they were 18, it can be concluded that a fearful attachment style was not common among participants whose parents had divorced.

Prediction 4: Those who reported their parents engaged in hostile arguing will have an insecure romantic attachment style. A 2x2 Chi Square analysis was used with secure and insecure romantic attachment as groups. There were 19 secure individuals and 5 insecure individuals who stated there was hostile arguing among their family members. The result was $\chi^2(1) = 1.75, p < .20$, a non-significant result.

Prediction 5: Those whose parents were depressed will have a dismissive romantic attachment style. The three different romantic attachment styles were looked at using a Chi Square. There were 17 secure individuals, 2 dismissive individuals, and 6 preoccupied individuals who stated their parents had been depressed. The result was $\chi^2(2) = 1.75, p < .50$, a non-significant result.

Prediction 6: Those who have a secure romantic attachment style will be in a current relationship. The mean time length of relationship for those who reported to be in a current romantic relationship was 36.6 months (approximately 3 years). The range was from 1 month to 13 years. Only those participants who had been in the relationship for at least six months or more were considered as having a current relationship. The Chi Square analysis was used and the groups were secure, dismissive, and preoccupied. There were 32 secure individuals, 2 dismissive individuals, and 2 preoccupied individuals who were involved in a current relationship. The result was $\chi^2(2) = 14.64, p < .01$, a significant result.

Discussion

This study attempted to see if there was any relationship between parental history and the type of current romantic attachment an adult has. This study also sought to determine if there is a type of romantic attachment that can be correlated with specific aspects of parental history such as depression, hostile arguing, and divorce. However, only one of the seven hypotheses was supported by statistically significant results.

There are several possible reasons for the lack of statistically significant results. The questionnaires were handed out at the very end of the semester. Participants may have filled out the questionnaires without thoroughly thinking through the questions, due to the end of the semester pressures/deadlines. The questionnaire measured only current romantic attachment. It would have been helpful to measure the participants' parental attachment style and determine whether or not if it correlated with parental stressors.

A few of the questions that were from The Research Consortium of Counseling and Psychological Service in Higher Education were phrased "Family member." It may have been better for the researcher to switch this phrase to "Parent(s)." This would be helpful as a few of the participants wrote that it was the participant's brother who was arrested or their grandmother who was depressed. It is difficult to assess if the remaining participants answered "yes" to the questions in relation only to their parents and not to other family members.

As with all samples, it would have been ideal to have a larger number of participants from whom to draw results. It would also have been desirable to have results from those who have a fearful-avoidant attachment style. When calculating the Chi Square Analysis there were only three contributing attachment groups for the analysis instead of four. Because we were lacking a fourth group, the power of the results may have been reduced.

The hypothesis that those whose parents divorced but did not remarry would have an insecure attachment style was not found to be statistically significant. This is in support of Hazan & Shaver (1987) and Lopez et al. (2000). Hazan and Shaver (1987) found that parental divorce seemed unrelated to attachment type, even though quality of relationships with parents was associated with type. The best predictors of adult attachment type, claim Hazan & Shaver (1987), were respondents' perceptions of the quality of their relationship with each parent and the parents' relationship with each other. The current study had similar results for attachment styles compared to Hazan & Shaver (1987). A little over half of the participants were secure and the remaining two were fairly split. Lopez et al. (2000) state the experience of parental divorce appears to have an adverse impact on how the participants' viewed their early bonds with their parents but no on current adult attachment orientations. The current study had 38.6% (n = 70) participants report that their parents were divorced, a figure which is similar to the number reported in Lopez et al.'s (2000) study (31%).

Ensign et al. (1998) found that parental hostility had a stronger influence on children than does the family structure and came to the conclusion that it is actually parental conflict rather than the actual divorce that negatively affects children; unfortunately, the current study does not support that finding. Ensign et al. (1998), however, looked at parental attachment rather than romantic attachment which is the focus of the current study. Parental attachment is affected by conflict between the parents in that it promotes less closeness in the parent-child relationship, including affective quality of attachment, parental fostering of autonomy and emotional support provided. This could be why Ensign et al. found that hostile arguing was correlated with parental attachment but the current study did not find a correlation for romantic attachment.

Walker and Ehrenberg's (1998) results were supported by the current research findings in that relationship status was significantly related to attachment style. Their participants were also undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology class. To determine the type of attachment they administered the Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and the Relationship Scales Questionnaire (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994), so they also measured current attachment instead of parental attachment.

The data from the current study suggests that parents do not really have to worry as much about whether their depression, hostile arguing, or divorce will have an effect on their child's romantic attachment style. According to the data resulting from this study, the majority of young people had a secure romantic attachment whether or not they experienced parental depression, arguing, or divorce. The prediction that those who had a secure romantic attachment style would be in a current romantic relationship was supported and adds to the overwhelming advantages of having a secure romantic attachment style.

Ideas for future research would be to look to ways that children with a secure romantic attachment cope with parents who are depressed, divorced, or who have hostile arguing. Do they

have someone else they use as secure base, such as a mentor, teacher, or some other relative? Do they instead have a strong friendship group? Do they see a therapist?

There were surprisingly a few dimensions that had a larger percentage of the insecure romantic attachment group. These dimensions should be studied more extensively to see if those parents who experience them may have a direct effect on current romantic attachment. These dimensions are: death of a parent, alcoholism, drug addiction, gambling, and eating disorders.

It would be interesting to see, in the cases of those who have a secure attachment and were in a current romantic relationship, whether their significant other also had a secure attachment. Could being in a serious (at least 3 years) romantic relationship have allowed the individual to develop a secure attachment?

Overall one of the predictions produced a significant result. Having a secure attachment is beneficial and has been proven by past research and supported by the research conducted in this study. The question is, how can a person move from an insecure attachment to a secure one? This question should be explored so that society might be able to develop a way to help adults, youth, and children who have an insecure childhood attachment evolve, grow, and acquire a secure attachment during their adult years.

Table 1

Percents of Participants Who Answered Yes to the Parental History Questions for Total, Secure, and Insecure.

Parental History	Percent of 70 Total Participants Answering Yes	Percent of 49 Secure Participants Answering Yes	Percent of 21 Insecure Participants Answering Yes
Parents divorced or separated before you were 18	38.6	44.9	23.8
Family frequently moved	21.4	24.5	14.3
Parent(s) unemployed for an extended period of time	25.7	30.6	19.0
Frequent, hostile arguing among family members	34.3	38.8	23.8
Death of parent(s) before you were 18	2.9	0.0	9.5
Parent(s) with a drinking problem	25.7	22.4	33.3
Parent(s) with a drug problem	5.7	2.0	14.3
Parent(s) with a gambling problem	4.3	0.0	14.3
Physical abuse in your family	10.0	12.2	4.8
Sexual abuse in your family	2.9	4.1	0.0
Rape/sexual assault of yourself or family member	4.3	6.1	0.0
Family member hospitalized for emotional problems	12.9	14.3	9.5
Family member diagnosed with a mental disorder	20.0	22.4	14.3
Family member attempted suicide	8.6	8.2	9.5
Family member committed suicide	5.8	6.1	4.8
Family member with a debilitating illness, injury, or handicap	20.0	22.4	14.3
Family member prosecuted for criminal activity	12.9	14.3	9.5

Parental History	Percent of 70 Total Participants Answering Yes	Percent of 49 Secure Participants Answering Yes	Percent of 21 Insecure Participants Answering Yes
Family member with an eating disorder	20.0	14.3	33.3
Parent(s) had an extramarital affair	22.9	24.5	19.0
Lived with a single parent	31.4	32.7	28.6
Parent(s) that were depressed	35.7	34.7	38.1
If your parents are divorced, did you custodial parent remarry?	25.7	28.6	19.0
Are you currently involved in a current romantic relationship	51.4	65.3	19

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