

Perceptions of Past and Present Attachment Relationships

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by

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the extent to which individuals' recollections of their attachment relationships during childhood were associated with their present attachment relationships, and how attachment was associated with the willingness to sacrifice for a relationship and psychological well-being. 177 participants completed questionnaires concerning their perceptions of their attachment relationships, their willingness to sacrifice in order to maintain their relationships, and their psychological well-being. Results revealed that perceptions of past attachment relationships with mother, father, and best friend were positively associated with present relationships, including the present relationship with one's romantic partner. Past and present attachment relationships were positively associated with the willingness to sacrifice for the benefit of the relationship with the parent or the best friend, but not with the romantic partner. Finally, higher quality past and present attachment relationships were associated with higher psychological well-being. Results imply that childhood attachment relationships are enduring, and instrumental for present relationship functioning and psychological well-being.

Perceptions of Past and Present Attachment Relationships

According to Bowlby (1973), attachment styles in adulthood stem from the bond children develop with parents during early childhood. Bowlby's idea of attachment style was thought of after learning about "the strange situation," an experiment conducted to observe how infants responded to varying situations. Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) organized Bowlby's conceptualization of attachment style into three types of attachment in reference to infants, and Hazan and Shaver (1987) translated these styles to refer to adult attachment.

The first is secure attachment, which means infants seek proximity and contact, or greet the parent at a distance with a smile or wave. The infant also feels comfortable to explore the world around him or her and to use the parent as a secure base (Ainsworth et al, 1978). Secure attachment in adulthood refers to when the individual finds it relatively easy to get close to others and feels comfortable depending on others and having others depend on him or her (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The adult does not often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to him or her.

The second is avoidant attachment, which means infants avoid or are indifferent toward the parent. In fearful situations, the infant is more likely to shun the mother instead of seeking her in order to calm fears. Also, the infant is less likely to respond to affectionate behavior, such as hugging and kissing, from the parent (Tracy & Ainsworth, 1981). Avoidant attachment in adulthood refers to adults who are somewhat uncomfortable being close to others. They find it difficult to trust others completely, and it is difficult to allow themselves to depend on others. The adult is nervous when anyone gets too close, and often, love partners want him or her to be more intimate than he or she feels comfortable being.

The third style is anxious/ambivalent attachment, which means infants passively or actively show hostility toward the parent. They may demonstrate this hostility by being unresponsive when their parents behave affectionately toward them (Tracy & Ainsworth, 1981). The infant may also sometimes participate in excessive clinging. In one study Ainsworth et al. (1987), found that anxious/ambivalent children clung excessively to their mothers when afraid, but reassurance from mothers in an attempt to calm fears was ignored by the children. In adulthood, anxious/ambivalent attachment is when the individual finds that others are reluctant to get as close as he or she would like to be. Anxious/ambivalent adults often worry that their partners do not really love them or will not want to stay with them. The anxious/ambivalent adult wants to merge completely with another person, and this desire sometimes scares people away.

There is abundant research conducted on the influence attachment style may have on adult relationships. For example, Frazier, Byer, Fischer, Wright, and DeBord (1996) tested the extent to which partner attachment styles predict relationship satisfaction. They looked at similarities between one's own and the relationship partner's attachment style and compared it with relationship satisfaction. They also examined the correlation between the parents' attachment style (referred to as care-giving style) and participants' attachment style. Results revealed that participants reported a correlation between their parents' care-giving styles in terms of attachment and the participants' adult attachment style and partner choice. In other words, participants were most attracted to romantic partners with similar attachment styles to their own, and the participants' attachment style was related to the attachment styles of their parents' attachment style in general; no intercorrelation was found between sex of the participants and parents. More specifically, results included that participants who did not rate themselves as having behavior reflecting one specific attachment style (referred to as varying) were more likely

to desire a romantic partner who also varied in attachment style. Also, anxious participants were more likely to have an anxious romantic partner, and preferred this over a secure or avoidant partner. Finally, results revealed that participants who rated their mothers as ambivalent and cold were less attracted to a potential romantic partner with a secure attachment style. Results in general suggest higher relationship satisfaction with a person who has the desired attachment style.

Additionally, Collins, Cooper, Albino, and Allard (2002) found that individuals with an avoidant attachment style in adolescence were more likely to have adverse relationship outcomes in adulthood. More specifically, respondents with an avoidant attachment style reported lower satisfaction, intimacy, and disclosure between partners and viewed their relationship as being more poorly functioning overall. Also, Collins et al. (2002) reported less effective problem-solving and a higher level of conflict in the relationships. Taken together, research supports the idea that a person's early attachment style to parents predicts attachment and relationship outcomes in adulthood.

There is also research investigating attachment style and how attachment may vary across relationships with different attachment figures. For example, La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, and Deci (2000) conducted a study investigating whether or not individuals have different attachments to different attachment figures, and how this relates to psychological well-being. Participants responded to attachment questionnaires for father, mother, best friend, and romantic partner. Results revealed that there is substantial variability across relationship partners; security of attachment scores for each partner varied. In other words, a person can have high security with one attachment figure, such as best friend, but not have high security with a different attachment figure, such as mother. A second hypothesis of this study was that getting one's psychological

needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness) met would predict security of attachment. In other words, when one's needs were reported as being met, it was hypothesized that one would be more likely to feel secure. Finally, results revealed that overall security was associated with psychological well-being, but variability across figures did not detract from well-being. In other words, if an individual had high security with one attachment figure and low security with another attachment figure, one would not be less likely to experience well-being than an individual with less variability across attachment figures.

Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA)

The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) is an inventory that was developed because there was no comprehensive and reliable self-report measure that assessed adolescent parent and peer relations in relation to attachment theory. Accordingly, there was a need for a comprehensive and reliable multifactorial measure of attachment. The IPPA measures trust, communication, and alienation (i.e., unresponsiveness or inconsistent responsiveness) in relationships with parents and peers. It is not an instrument to classify attachment style, but rather a measure of security. Higher security is operationalized as IPPA scores reflecting high communication and trust, and low alienation; lower security reflects IPPA scores that are low in communication and trust and high in alienation. During the validation of this questionnaire, results revealed that those who were higher in security reported greater satisfaction with themselves, a higher likelihood of seeking social support, and less symptomatic responses to stressful life events (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). This corresponds with the idea that a secure attachment is a healthy attachment. Armsden and Greenberg also examined a possible correlation between attachment style and psychological well-being, and found a positive correlation between secure attachment to parents and psychological well-being,

and a significant correlation between peer attachment and self-esteem as well (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Additionally, Duchesne and Larose (2007) conducted research using the IPPA to examine the quality of adolescents' attachment to their parents and found quality of attachment to be positively associated with academic motivation.

While attachment has been assessed in children and adulthood separately, it is also important to keep in mind the research that focuses on how people perceived their parents as a child in retrospect and how that might relate to the person's current attachment style to relationship figures- not only parents but friends and romantic partners as well. One noteworthy study is Collins and Read's (1990) investigation, which demonstrated a similarity between the attachment style of an individual's romantic partner and the care-giving style of the individual's parents, especially the opposite-sex parent. They found that women who perceived their fathers as warm and responsive were more likely to be dating men who felt they could depend on others and who felt comfortable getting close. Men and women who saw their opposite sex parent as cold and distant were less likely to be dating a man or woman resembling the opposite sex parent. Men who described their mothers as cold or inconsistent were more likely to be dating women who were anxious, and if they perceived their mothers as distant, they were somewhat less likely to be dating a woman who felt she could depend on others. Men's ratings of their fathers were not related to their partner's style.

The present study differs from the Collins et al. (1990) study in that it investigates overall security of attachment not only to mother, father, and romantic partner, but also with the best friend. Further, participants reflect on their present relationships as well as their relationships in the past to determine the extent to which their feelings of attachment are intercorrelated. The present study also examines relationship processes, such as the willingness to sacrifice, and

psychological well-being, whereas the previous study looked only at attachment. In other words, the present study does not solely focus on how attachment to parents is related to a romantic partner, but rather investigates a wider range of intercorrelations among attachment figures as well as the willingness to sacrifice for a relationship and psychological well-being.

Willingness to Sacrifice

Given that attachment is related to relationship outcomes (e.g., Collins et al., 1990; Frazier et al., 1996), it can be inferred that attachment is related to behaviors within relationships as well. One behavior examined in the present research is the willingness to sacrifice, which refers to the extent that a person would be willing to give up an important activity in order to maintain his or her relationship with an attachment figure. Six studies conducted by Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, and Cox (1997), using both a novel self-report measure and a behavioral measure of willingness to sacrifice, found that one of the aspects associated with the willingness to sacrifice is that the person has poor alternative relationship choices. The term “alternative relationship choice” refers to people outside the relationship that the participants perceive to be possible romantic partners. The participants either perceived themselves to have a lack of (i.e. poor) alternatives or as having good alternatives to the relationship. Results revealed a correlation between the extent to which participants would sacrifice for a romantic relationship and poor alternatives; individuals were less willing to sacrifice when they reported having good alternative relationship potentials. It can be inferred that individuals are more likely to sacrifice when they have poor alternative choices in an attempt to avoid being alone. The willingness to sacrifice has also been associated with strong commitment, high satisfaction, high investments, and superior couple functioning (Van Lange, Agnew, Harinck, & Steemers, 1997).

In summary, willingness to sacrifice is demonstrated in past research as a choice that is situation specific. Willingness to sacrifice can be related to poor alternative relationship choices, inferring that one is more willing to sacrifice simply for fear of not having another relationship choice, whereas it is also positively related to superior couple functioning in general, which infers that individuals are also more willing to sacrifice to maintain a superior relationship, regardless of having other relationship choices.

The Present Study

Although attachment theory suggests that childhood attachment relationships are long-lasting, there is a need for more research addressing this important issue in order to maintain the coherence and validity of it (Waters & Cummings, 2000). It is also important to build upon the current body of research which addresses security level over time with an emphasis on one's perception of relationships. The focus of the present investigation was to determine whether perceptions of past attachment relationships with parents and best friend predict perceptions of current attachment relationships with parents, best friend, and romantic partner. Participants were asked to reflect on their relationships with their parents and best friend when they were around the age of 9 and complete a series of questionnaires about their relationships. Crovitz and Quina-Holland (1976) conducted a study which revealed that most participants were able to recall memories dated back to before 8 years of age, suggesting a possible time from which past perceptions are able to be formed. Age 9 was chosen in the present research because it is unknown how far before age 8 memories can be recalled and to ensure that memories of attachment figures could be recalled. Furthermore, in asking participants to report earliest memories, Waldfogel (1948) found that most people were not able to recall many memories before the age of 8.

Past research suggests that it is not as important what a person has experienced in an objective view, but rather the person's perception of what he or she has experienced (Brunell, Pilkington, & Webster, 2007; Lai & Ching, 2007). Furthermore, the present research examined the extent to which perceptions of past and present attachment relationships would be associated with the willingness to sacrifice for one's relationship partner. Finally, the association between attachment relationships and psychological well-being was examined because previous research has shown that attachment plays a role in psychological health (i.e., Armsden et al., 1987; La Guardia et al., 2000).

Hypotheses 1 was that level of security in past relationships would be highly associated with security in present relationships. Hypothesis 2 was that level of security would be associated with the willingness to sacrifice an important activity in order to maintain a relationship. Hypothesis 3 was that higher secure relationships would be associated with higher psychological well-being.

Method

Participants

Participants were 177 (80 male, 97 female) undergraduates from a regional Midwestern campus who received partial credit for the Research Experience Program. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 46 ($M = 19.95$, $SD = 4.74$). Ninety two participants were currently in a romantic relationship, with a mean dating length of 27.91 months ($SD = 39.86$). Sexual orientation consisted of 164 heterosexual, 2 homosexual, 4 bisexual and 4 unsure participants. One person did not respond to the question concerning sexual orientation. Race/ethnicity consisted of 144 Caucasians, 16 African Americans, 4 Hispanics, 3 Asian Americans, 1 Native American, and 5 who labeled themselves as "other." Two people did not respond to the question concerning race/ethnicity.

Materials

The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden et al., 1987) was used to assess attachment security. The original inventory was constructed to refer to parents in general, rather than father and mother separately, and to peers in general rather than a specific best friend. Twenty eight items were modified to assess the perception of past security with father and mother (e.g., “My father respected my feelings;” “I trusted my mother;” for father: $\alpha = .92$, $M = 65.80$, $SD = 28.01$; for mother: $\alpha = .91$, $M = 52.51$, $SD = 23.16$). Twenty five items were used to assess the perception of past security with best friend (e.g., “I told my best friend about my problems and troubles;” $\alpha = .94$, $M = 66.51$, $SD = 22.23$). Present perceptions of security with father, mother, and best friend were assessed with the same items as stated above, but in the present tense (for father: $\alpha = .93$, $M = 69.45$, $SD = 30.85$; for mother: $\alpha = .92$, $M = 59.57$, $SD = 26.10$; for best friend: $\alpha = .95$, $M = 53.78$, $SD = 20.27$). In addition, present perception of security with the romantic partner was assessed with the same 25 items as the best friend ($\alpha = .94$, $M = 50.75$, $SD = 18.76$). Participants responded to all items using a 7-point scale (1 = Always true, 7 = Never true) to indicate the extent to which each item was related to his or her close relationship. Participants were asked not to respond to items referring to romantic partner if they were not currently in a romantic relationship. Also, if one’s attachment figure was deceased, they were asked not to respond to the items assessing that attachment figure. More specifically, if the attachment figure was alive in the past but not the present, they were allowed to complete the past tense questionnaire.

The Willingness to Sacrifice Scale (Van Lange et al., 1997) was used to assess the extent to which an individual would consider giving up an important activity in order to maintain a relationship with each attachment figure. Questions asked the participants to indicate the 4 most

important activities to them and the likelihood that they would give up each activity in order to maintain their relationship with each relationship figure. Participants rated their answers using a 9-point scale (0 = Definitely would not consider giving up activity, 8 = Would definitely consider giving up activity). Participants completed this scale with reference to father ($\alpha = .84$, $M = 14.15$, $SD = 9.17$), mother ($\alpha = .80$, $M = 15.56$, $SD = 8.62$), best friend ($\alpha = .76$, $M = 10.86$, $SD = 7.49$), and romantic partner ($\alpha = .79$, $M = 14.26$, $SD = 8.09$).

Psychological well-being was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), the Life Satisfaction Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and the Vitality Scale (Ryan & Frederick, 1997). The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale consisted of 10 items (e.g., “I feel like I have a number of good qualities”). Participants responded using a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The Life Satisfaction Scale included seven items (e.g., “In most ways, my life is close to my ideal”). This was measured on a 7-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree). The Vitality Scale consisted of seven items (e.g., “I have energy and spirit”). This was also responded to using a 7-point scale (1 = Not at all true, 7 = Very true). Internal consistency for the combined measure of psychological well-being was reliable ($\alpha = .75$). Therefore, these scales were standardized and combined to form a composite measure of psychological well-being ($M = .01$, $SD = 2.46$).

Finally, participants completed demographic questions such as sex, age, race, sexual orientation, romantic relationship status, and how long involved if in a romantic relationship.

Procedure

Upon arriving to the study session, participants were given the questionnaire packet to complete. Participants were debriefed upon completing the questionnaire packed and thanked for their participation.

Results

Perceptions of past relationships were positively intercorrelated (See Table 1), as well as perceptions of present relationships (See Table 2). In other words, attachment to father, mother, and best friend in the past were all positively related. Also, attachment to all figures including romantic partner in the present were positively related; this indicates a positive trend of secure relationships among relationship partners.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 was that level of security in past relationships would be highly associated with security in present relationships. Consistent with hypothesis 1, perceptions of past interpersonal relationships with mother, father, and best friend were positively associated with present relationships in general, including the present relationship with one's romantic partner (See Table 3). Results in general indicate that if a person recalls having highly secure relationships with his or her mother, father, and best friend, he or she is more likely to also have highly secure relationships in early adulthood with his or her mother, father, best friend, and romantic partner.

Hypothesis 2 was that level of security would be associated with the willingness to sacrifice an important activity in order to maintain a relationship. The willingness to sacrifice was positively correlated with all attachment figures excluding the recollection of the past best friend and the romantic partner (See Table 4). This indicates that the more highly secure a relationship was, the more likely the participant was to sacrifice for that relationship figure. In order to further explore the association between attachment to the romantic partner and the willingness to sacrifice, attachment to the romantic partner and relationship length were

regressed on willingness to sacrifice for romantic partner scores. Length of time in the romantic relationship was positively related to willingness to sacrifice for the romantic partner ($\beta = .28, t = 2.49, p < .05$) indicating that the longer one was in a romantic relationship, the more likely he or she was to sacrifice to maintain the romantic relationship. However, attachment to the romantic partner remained non-significant ($\beta = -.11, t = -.96, p = .34$).

Finally, hypothesis 3 was that higher secure relationships would be associated with higher psychological well-being. Consistent with hypothesis 3, psychological well-being was positively and significantly related to all attachment relationships in both the past and the present (See Table 4). In other words, a more highly secure attachment rating predicted higher psychological well-being.

Discussion

According to hypotheses, level of security in past relationships would be highly associated with security in present relationships. Consistent with expectations, past and present interpersonal relationships were positively correlated. Perceptions of past and present relationships with participants' mother and father reflected the highest positive correlation. Perceptions of past and present best friend were also positively correlated. Results indicate that not only is it suggested that level of security is stable from childhood to early adulthood among the same relationship figure (Ainsworth, 1989), but that relationships with different individuals tend to be similar. This also suggests that relationships with parents formed in childhood predict relationships made with others in early adulthood. Significant positive correlations were found among present relationship figures as well. The intercorrelations in general suggest that individuals tend to develop, or at least perceive themselves to develop, similar relationships with parents as with best friend(s) and romantic partner, and that the relationship experienced with

parents and best friends can influence and be specifically related to the relationship with one's romantic partner. Accordingly, perceptions of present romantic partner were positively correlated with past perceptions of mother, father, and best friend. This could be supportive of past research suggesting similarities between attachment to parents and the possible association with attachment to romantic partners (e.g., Collins et al., 1990; Shaver & Hazan, 1987).

Hypotheses also included that level of security would be associated with the willingness to sacrifice an important activity in order to maintain a relationship. This hypothesis was partially supported; there was not a significant correlation of willingness to sacrifice with past best friend and present romantic partner, however, positive correlations were found among all other past and present attachment figures. One possible reason for the lack of correlation between willingness to sacrifice and past best friend could be that participants rated willingness to sacrifice for only a current best friend; the current best friend could be different from the best friend referred to from childhood. A possible explanation for the lack of correlation between willingness to sacrifice and romantic partner could be the population investigated; the mean age of participants was 19.9 years, suggesting that the majority of participants were most likely new to college; this implies that the recent life change and transition into college, as well as the heightened responsibility of being new college students, could cause romantic relationships to not be as important, regardless of reported security level. The results in general, however, show that length of time in the romantic relationship was positively related to willingness to sacrifice for the romantic partner; this suggests that the longer the romantic relationship, the more likely one was to sacrifice to maintain the romantic relationship, and show higher levels of reported willingness to sacrifice in more highly secure relationships. This suggests that one is more likely to sacrifice for an attachment figure only when there is a secure attachment at the base of the

relationship, and that this is more likely in longer relationships. In other words, relationships that are not perceived as highly secure are in turn perceived to lack trust and be high in alienation. It can be inferred that one is not likely to sacrifice for someone who is not trusted and who alienates them, whereas if the opposite is true, one is more likely to sacrifice.

The final hypothesis was that higher secure relationships would be associated with higher psychological well-being. Results supported this hypothesis, revealing a positive significant correlation between psychological well-being and all past and present relationship figures addressed. This is consistent with past research results (Armsden et al., 1987; La Guardia et al., 2000). Results suggest that highly secure relationships are an essential part of having psychological well-being, and that individuals' psychological well-being could suffer as a consequence of not having highly secure relationships over time, which further support and replicate La Guardia et al. (2000) results.

The benefits of empirical research on relationships are becoming increasingly important and numerous. Specifically, the present research supports the idea that psychological well-being is related to relationships with whom individuals are closest (Armsden et al., 1987; La Guardia et al., 2000). It appears that people's psychological health benefits when they have others in their lives that they can trust and rely on.

One surprising result was that there was no correlation between the attachment to the romantic partner and the willingness to sacrifice. This raises questions about why this is so; could the lack of significance be related to the population investigated? Is there a relationship between post-college relationships and willingness to sacrifice? Thus, one limitation of the present research is that there were not enough additional questions asked about the romantic relationship in order to examine possible explanations for the lack of a significant correlation

between present romantic relationship and willingness to sacrifice. Another limitation is that the research was a retrospective investigation; it would be beneficial to conduct a study from early childhood to adulthood as an alternative manner of investigating whether attachment relationships are stable over time.

One strength of the research is that it supports attachment theory more broadly by highlighting that attachment relationships appear to endure over time, as suggested by attachment theorists (Bowlby, 1973; Collins et al., 2002). In addition it shows one way attachment (specifically security level) is associated with relationship processes, such as the willingness to sacrifice. Finally, it backs up prior research by replicating a significant link to psychological well-being. However, additional research is needed to better understand the links between attachment and relationship functioning. For example, future research could include investigating the association between attachment in the past and present with positive relationship behaviors and relationship processes; such as self-disclosure, commitment, and constructive coping in response to conflict. Also, research could be conducted to test an alternative definition of security. For example, Waters and Cummings (2000) proposed that there are different aspects of security of relationships between middle childhood and adulthood, including, for example, that children are hypothesized to gain security by aspects within the school environment, such as sports and academic competence. Adults are hypothesized to gain security from aspects in the work and cultural environment, such as perceived status, wealth, and religion. The emphasis is that as individuals age, some areas of importance shift from an emphasis on school to an emphasis on work and culture. In contrast, other aspects that are hypothesized to remain similar from childhood to adulthood include social relationships and alliances, physical assets (in childhood), and health in general in adulthood. It would be

beneficial to conduct research investigating the proposed alternative forms of security in relation to attachment theory and psychological well-being in order to gain a more diverse knowledge of felt security in general and as related to psychological well-being.

In summary, the present research reflects significant findings of a correlation between perceptions of past close relationships and present relationships, as well as a correlation with the relationship functioning and psychological well-being. Finally, similar research should be conducted with a focus on alternative definitions of security and how it related to relationship functioning, as well as examining if it is still found to be correlated to psychological health.

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Table 1

Past attachment relationship correlations

	Mother	Father	Best Friend
1. Mother	-	.493**	.210**
2. Father		-	.291**
3. Best Friend			-

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 2

Present relationship correlations

	Mother	Father	Best Friend	Romantic Partner
1. Mother	-	.452**	.354**	.379**
2. Father		-	.292**	.295**
3. Best Friend			-	.416**
4. Romantic Partner				-

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 3

Past and present relationship correlations

	Mother Past	Father Past	Best Friend Past
1. Mother Present	.808**	.385**	.208**
2. Father Present	.342**	.780**	.211**
3. Best Friend Present	.289**	.295**	.331**
4. Romantic Partner Present	.343**	.263*	.419**

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 4

Correlations of psychological well-being and relationship figures

	Willingness to Sacrifice	Psychological Well-being
1. Mother Past	.254**	.309**
2. Mother Present	.214**	.319*
3. Father Past	.244**	.320**
4. Father Present	.316**	.277*
5. Friend Past	-.024	.165*
6. Friend Present	.183*	.386**
7. Romantic Partner Present	.115	.312**

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$