

The Stability of Attachment Security from Infancy to Adolescence and Early Adulthood: General Discussion

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For over three decades, critics of the developmental and psychometric paradigms have argued that individual differences are neither stable, coherent, nor clinically significant. The present studies extend a long line of research demonstrating the coherence of individual development in attachment security. They make it clear that attachment security can be stable from infancy through early adulthood and that change in attachment security is meaningfully related to changes in the family environment. The task now is to better understand the roles of cross-age consistency in caregiver behavior and the structure of mental representations of early experience in stability and change.

INTRODUCTION

According to Bowlby (1973, 1980), experience with primary caregivers leads to expectations and beliefs (“working models”) about the self, the world, and relationships. He described these representations as persistent and yet open to revision in light of experience. Persistent attachment representations allow positive secure base experiences to guide behavior when someone “stronger and wiser” is not at hand. They also afford a degree of buffering against future unsupportive and disappointing relationship experiences. An unfortunate corollary is that unsupportive care also results in expectations and beliefs that guide (mis)behavior and complicate relationships (Bowlby, 1985).

Flexibility in working models is also important. Openness to experience is a hallmark of Bowlby’s (1969) control systems motivation model, his view of attachment development, and his desire for attachment theory to have a significant impact on clinical practice (Bowlby 1973, 1988). Bowlby’s emphasis on the importance of real (as opposed to intrapsychic) events in personality development and psychopathology was a major departure from classic psychoanalytic theory. Although Bowlby (1969) implied that the onset and consolidation of attachment patterns was accomplished in early childhood, much of his theory and

clinical work envisioned working models evolving and responding to experience through adolescence (Waters & Cummings, 2000).

The results of the three studies presented here show a mix of continuity and discontinuity in attachment from infancy to adolescence and early adulthood:¹ Two of the studies (Hamilton, 2000; Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000) found significant continuity over time, and one study (Weinfield, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2000) found no significant continuity over time. At first glance, the findings across these studies might be considered inconsistent. Closer examination, however, reveals that a commonality ties these studies together into a coherent picture: Across the three studies there is consistency in the role of attachment-related life experiences in marking continuity and change.

These studies make clear that attachment security can be stable from infancy through early adulthood and that change in attachment security is related to meaningful changes in the family environment. Both Waters et al. (2000) and Hamilton (2000) found that the majority of their participants maintained the same attachment status over time. Waters et al., studying a middle-class sample, found that changes in attachment classification were associated with the occurrence of negative life events. Hamilton, studying an alternative lifestyle sample, also found that these neg-

Summary discussion of Waters, Hamilton, & Weinfield, “The Stability of Attachment Security from Infancy to Adolescence and Early Adulthood: General Introduction”; Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, “Attachment Security in Infancy and Early Adulthood: A Twenty-year Longitudinal Study”; Hamilton, “Continuity and Discontinuity of Attachment from Infancy”; and Weinfield, Sroufe, & Egeland, “Attachment from Infancy to Early Adulthood in a High-Risk Sample: Continuity, Discontinuity, and Their Correlates.”

¹ Although these studies are the only such studies currently completed in the United States, two other studies of continuity of attachment from infancy to age 16 have been completed in Germany. For further information, see Becker-Stoll (1997) and Zimmermann (1994).

ative life events operated primarily by maintenance of already established patterns of insecurity or by movement from secure to insecure patterns. Overall, however, there was a moderate rate of attachment-related negative life events in both of these samples.

Weinfield et al. (2000) investigated these same issues in a highly stressed sample, in which attachment-related negative life events were far more frequent and more severe than in the Waters et al. (2000) and Hamilton (2000) samples. The participants in this study did not maintain the same attachment classifications. These were not, however, random changes; change was associated with specific factors, such as maternal depression, that have every likelihood of negatively affecting caregiver availability and responsiveness.

Rather than being inconsistent, the findings of these three studies present a coherent picture of attachment as a dynamic process over the course of development. Vaughn, Egeland, Sroufe, and Waters (1979) have emphasized that attachment theory requires both stability and change. The theory requires significant stability—but not when existing beliefs about significant others and relationships are under assault. It also requires change—but primarily where life experiences challenge existing beliefs and expectations. Ainsworth (1995) suggested that research showing a combination of stability and change requires careful examination of the rules and processes that govern both pathways; both stability and change are findings that merit further exploration.

MODELS AND MECHANISMS OF STABILITY AND CHANGE

As Waters et al. (2000) indicate, stable individual differences do not explain behavior; stability is a discovery that requires an explanation. The present studies do not implicate any particular models or mechanisms of stability. A variety of mechanisms might be in play. Two important candidates are early experience and consistency in caregiver behavior. Rutter (1979) has argued persuasively that, although Bowlby overestimated the risks inherent in separation per se, gross failures of early care may have long-term effects on social development. This is especially likely if family and environmental influences act continuously to maintain early difficulties (Sameroff & Chandler, 1975; Waters, Kondo-Ikemura, Posada, & Richters, 1991).

A number of other processes may also be relevant. For example, Epstein (1973, 1991) suggests that conceptualizations of self and social relationships formed early in life are more general and less open to revision than similar beliefs acquired later in life. Tempera-

ment constructs may also play a role in attachment stability and change, not as an alternative interpretation of attachment measures but rather as moderators of infants' and children's responsiveness to negative life events and insensitive or changing patterns of care. The role of temperament in the development of adult attachment representations has yet to be explored. In addition, developmental theorists have emphasized that individuals have a significant impact on their environments (e.g., Plomin, 1989; Scarr & McCartney, 1983). The effects of early experience and also heritable personality and behavioral traits can exert a continuing bias on parent-child interaction. The result can be a stabilizing effect on both the environment and the child's individual characteristics. Such processes are important to understand because they have important implications for research design and interpretation and also for prevention and intervention.

Change in attachment classification also requires explanation, and although these studies demonstrate that attachment-related life events are associated with change, no specific process or model is implicated. The effects of negative life events on attachment security deserve to be examined in their own right. Negative events could affect attachment security through a number of routes. From the point of view of attachment theory, working models are most likely to change in response to actual changes in caregiver availability and responsiveness. For example, marital problems could produce mood effects or cognitive demands that interfere with the caregiver's availability and responsiveness. Over time attachment representations might change in response to changes in caregiver behavior. Of course, negative events do not have to act directly on the caregiver. They might instead have a direct impact on another family member and then spread throughout the family system, thereby interfering secondarily with caregiving.

Negative events might, also change a child's *expectations* of a caregiver's availability and responsiveness directly. This might happen, for example, if a caregiver becomes chronically ill and the child infers that he or she is now less available. Attachment representations might then change before (or without) actual caregiving failures. Marital discord could have a similar effect (Cummings & Davies, 1996).

THE ROLE OF DEVELOPMENT IN CHANGE

All three studies presented here involve participants who are in late adolescence or early adulthood. Therefore, taking developmental issues into account when considering possible influences on stability and change is useful, particularly with respect to the issue of au-

tonomy from one's family of origin. Specifically, if one has experienced attachment-related negative life events, the presence of developmentally salient autonomy issues might make change from infant security to adult insecurity more likely.

If it can be inferred from the answers to the Adult Attachment Interview questions that an individual had strong negative experiences or few loving experiences with caregivers during childhood, a secure classification can be achieved only by the individual acknowledging that the experiences were negative and that they affected adult personality. Strong denial that negative experiences were actually negative, or denial that those experiences could have had any effect on the individual's development, will lead to a dismissing classification. A secure classification in the face of negative experiences requires some rethinking and analysis of childhood experience. Young adults who have not gained autonomy from their families of origin may find it too difficult emotionally and cognitively to acknowledge and explore poor treatment by a parent on whom they still depend. It seems plausible, then, that some shifting may occur later as autonomy is achieved and there is more opportunity for psychological exploration of the impact of childhood experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

The present studies provide descriptive information about the stability and change of attachment organization from infancy to late adolescence/early adulthood in a variety of developmental contexts. They also provide information about the relation between negative life events and changes in attachment classifications. This information is a necessary first step toward process-level research on attachment stability and change.

Any of the processes suggested here are consistent with Bowlby's view that attachment representations arise primarily from real experiences rather than intrapsychic events. Early empirical research on attachment stability (e.g., Waters, 1978) was undertaken in response to a situationist critique that claimed individual differences in attachment were neither stable, coherent, nor of any practical importance (Masters & Wellman, 1974; Mischel, 1968). Two decades of research have demonstrated that, as applied to attachment security, the situationist critique is incorrect. This has not come about because situations and environments proved unimportant. The critique failed primarily because both stability and change have proven more complicated and more interesting than the situationists imagined (Waters et al., 1991).

These studies suggest many possibilities for future avenues of research. First, there is no longitudinal data on continuity of AAI classifications from adolescence to adulthood. Research on AAI stability over this period of time would lend insight into whether late adolescent and adult representations are equivalent, or whether, particularly in cases where there have been negative attachment-related experiences, there is sometimes a period of transition for attachment representations. Second, re-interviewing some of the participants from the studies presented here as they complete the transition to adulthood and more of them become parents would also be informative. This would allow us to explore whether the rates of stability remain the same through adulthood. It would also allow for a prospective examination of intergenerational patterns of attachment.

Rather than simply resolving questions about continuity of attachment, the present studies should be taken as starting points for stimulating more research. These studies demonstrate that attachment security can be stable over very long periods of time. They also demonstrate that high intensity, attachment-related negative events are associated with changes in attachment security over such intervals. The task now is to explain the underlying processes.

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