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How children remember the Strange Situation: The role of attachment



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ABSTRACT

This study tested predictions from Bowlby's attachment theory about children's memory and suggestibility. Young children (3–5 years old, $N = 88$; 76% Caucasians) and their parents took part in the Strange Situation Procedure, a moderately distressing event and “gold standard” for assessing children's attachment quality. The children were then interviewed about what occurred during the event. Children's age and attachment security scores positively predicted correct information in free recall and accuracy in answering specific questions. For children with higher (vs. lower) attachment security scores, greater distress observed during the Strange Situation Procedure predicted increased resistance to misleading suggestions. In addition, for children who displayed relatively low distress during the Strange Situation Procedure, significant age differences in memory and suggestibility emerged as expected. However, for children who displayed greater distress during the Strange Situation Procedure, younger and older children's memory performances were equivalent. Findings suggest that attachment theory provides an important framework for

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understanding facets of memory development with respect to attachment-related information and that distress may alter assumed age patterns in memory development.

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Introduction

According to attachment theory, early in life infants form internal working models (IWMs) based on the degree to which their caregivers are available and provide support during times of distress (Bowlby, 1969). IWMs are viewed, theoretically, as fairly stable mental representations of self and close relationships. Based on infants' behavior in the Strange Situation, Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) identified three main patterns of attachment: secure, avoidant, and anxious. Secure infants view their caregivers as available and responsive when needed, and they generally cope effectively with distress and seek proximity, contact, and communication with their caregivers during reunions. Avoidant infants view their caregivers as unwilling or unable to soothe negative affect and, thus, tend to avoid or ignore their caregivers despite experiencing distress. Anxious infants represent their caregivers as inconsistently available or inconsistently supportive and, thus, sometimes cling excessively to caregivers to avoid separation and display angry resistant behavior on reunion following a separation. A fourth attachment pattern (i.e., disorganized) was added years after Ainsworth's and colleagues' original work (Main & Solomon, 1990). Disorganized infants see their caregivers as fear inducing, and infants' behavior shows signs of fear during reunions (e.g., freezing). Similar attachment patterns have been identified in children at preschool age (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985).

Some attachment researchers, instead of using the discrete categorical approach to measurement, have assessed the underlying attachment security versus insecurity dimension (e.g., National Institute of Child Health & Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 1997; van IJzendoorn, Vereijken, Bakersman-Kranenburg, & Riksen-Walraven, 2004; Waters & Deane, 1985). Fraley and Spieker (2003) concluded, after analyzing attachment data from more than 1000 children in the NICHD Study of Early Child Care, that attachment patterns are appropriately conceptualized in terms of continuous dimensions. As Waters and Deane (1985) pointed out, measuring security on a continuum permits researchers to tap meaningful differences within what would otherwise be viewed as homogeneous categories, thereby increasing precision and statistical power with respect to the security dimension.

The current study used a measure of the security dimension to provide an empirical test of predictions from attachment theory in relation to research regarding children's memory performance, including their suggestibility. Theoretically, the attachment system motivates children to seek close physical and/or emotional proximity to their primary caregivers in order to reduce fear, anxiety, and distress (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). A child's attachment system is activated (i.e., a set of attachment-related expectations and emotion regulation strategies start to affect and/or guide behavior) particularly under conditions of threat or stress, causing the child to look to caregivers for both protection and help in understanding the situation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Thompson, 2008). Of special concern here, the level of attachment system activation elicited by an event can bring into play attachment-related mechanisms that influence information processing and memory about a distressing experience (Bowlby, 1980, 1987; Dykas & Cassidy, 2011). Ainsworth's Strange Situation Procedure, used to assess attachment patterns, is (by design) moderately distressing for young children. This allows us to determine whether attachment security is related to memory for and suggestibility concerning experiences in the Strange Situation.

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