



The long reach of childhood. Childhood experiences influence close relationships and loneliness across life



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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to gain insight into the role of childhood relationships and experiences within the parental home for the formation and meaning of later family relationships and loneliness. Particularly, childhood attachment to mother and father and stressful childhood experiences were studied in their association with satisfaction in the romantic relationship, the quality of adult family ties and the perceived quality of the social network, i.e. loneliness in adulthood. Based on data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study ($N = 3980$) structural equation models were estimated to predict adult relationships and loneliness with childhood experiences. Positive attachment experiences with parents, such as reliability, closeness and supportiveness during childhood were associated with greater satisfaction in the romantic relationship, stronger family ties and less loneliness, whereas stressful childhood experiences, such as conflicts and violence negatively predicted the quality of adult relationships. Life span theoretical perspectives, such as attachment theory are discussed as useful unifying framework to study social relationships, their interconnectedness and association with outcome during all phases of life.

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1. Introduction

Clearly humans need each other. Social relationships play a major role in individuals' lives and can be the source of comfort, support and protection during the whole life course. Childhood relationships with parents are the first and most crucial relationships through which children learn to organize meaning (Marris, 1991). Childhood experiences lead to the formation of mental representations about the availability and reliability of trusted figures. These representations are thought to guide people in establishing close relationships throughout life (Fiori, Consedine, & Merz, 2011; Merz & Consedine, 2009). Research on childhood (e.g., Raikes & Thompson, 2008) and adolescence (e.g., Willemen, Schuengel, & Koot, 2009) clearly supports this supposition but less is known about

aspects of close relationships and their origin in adulthood and older age (Merz, Schuengel, & Schulze, 2007). This is unfortunate because adult relationships, especially the pair bond between romantic partners, can be an important resource in dealing with life's challenges such as aging, declining health and shrinking social networks. Given societal changes such as longevity, increasing divorce rates and acquiring different roles across life, it is important to examine aspects that might influence the development of adult family relationships and loneliness. One possible predictor of adult relationships might be childhood experience with availability and reliability of close figures, usually the parents, during childhood.

Based on an attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982) framework, the current study examined experiences within the relationship with parents during childhood (i.e., reliability, availability and stressful aspects), in their association with adult family ties, satisfaction with the romantic relationship and loneliness. First general concepts from attachment theory are discussed and applied

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into a life course framework. The remainder of the introduction describes possible relationship patterns based on childhood experiences leading to different relationship outcome and associations with loneliness in adulthood. We intended to take a life course approach in spanning childhood and adulthood in order to integrate the scattered literature on the role of family relationships for individuals during certain phases in life. We aim to contribute to the literature by shedding light on the mechanism behind the complex interplay among family relationships during childhood and in adulthood with paying special attention to the central role of the romantic bond. Data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS, Dykstra et al., 2012) are used to estimate structural models in explaining the interplay among childhood experiences, adult romantic relationships, family ties and loneliness.

1.1. Relationships across life—an attachment perspective

1.1.1. Childhood memories and the parental home

The underlying assumption about attachment across life is that close relationships in which security and comfort are sought and provided start in and continue beyond childhood (Colin, 1996). During the years from infancy to adolescence individuals gradually build up expectations regarding close ties, based on experiences in their relationships (Feeney, 2008). In parent–child interactions children receive answers and reactions either recognizing or ignoring their wishes and needs. When the caregiver is reacting sensitively to a child's needs and wishes, the child becomes able to integrate negative feelings like anger, grief, sadness and helplessness into goal oriented ideas. Based on this integration the child obtains a communicative strategy to also handle and cope with negative feelings. If however, the caregiver is ignoring or rejecting a child's needs and wishes, the expression of the child's anger can develop in a dysfunctional way (Grossmann, 2004). Experiences, memories and the expectations about the availability and responsiveness of close figures are incorporated into a mental representation of the self, of others and of close relationships, which guides perceptions and behavior in later relationships (Feeney, 2008). Children who have developed good relationships and attachment security, based on experiences with reliable caregivers, typically show positive views of the self and others, and desire closeness within relationships (Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2004) across life. They manage to maintain a balance between being autonomous and having satisfying relationships with others, depending on them or having others dependent on themselves. Such children are expected to establish and maintain healthy and fulfilling relationships with a romantic partner and family members during adulthood.

Conversely, early experiences characterized by stressful childhood environments, unavailability of trusted figures and negative life events such as neglect or violence, lead to the development of less positive representations of relationships. In such relationships either the self and/or the relationship partners are negatively viewed. Insecurity about relationships with important people limits our trust

in the world and the risks we are prepared to take to explore it (Merz & Consedine, 2012). Persons who have developed such negative representations generally have pessimistic views regarding interactions with other people (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003), associated with less social support exchange and ineffective support seeking in times of stress (Kobak & Sceery, 1988). They have difficulties with being close or dependent on others as well as having others depend on them, accompanied by difficulties with balancing care giving and care seeking behavior within significant relationships.

Although attachment research has always acknowledged the central role of primary caregivers, usually the mother, for the development of children into adolescents and adults, only few studies have extended this work to covering the whole life course (Van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2010). In addition, for a long time attachment research has neglected the role of fathers and mainly focused on the mother. However, fathers play a special and unique role in upbringing children and contribute specific features to the social and emotional development of children (Mallers, Charles, Neupert, & Almeida, 2010). Especially in stimulating exploration, fathers have been shown to be important figures in children's development (Grossmann, Grossmann, Kindler, & Zimmermann, 2008).

1.1.2. Romantic relations

Finding someone to share life with in a long lasting and stable partnership is a key social process, many adults aim to establish (Holmes & Johnson, 2009). Romantic relationships play a central role in adults' lives and are associated with all kinds of outcome, such as wellbeing (Musick & Bumpass, 2012; Soons & Liefbroer, 2008; Soons, Liefbroer, & Kalmijn, 2009), health (Musick & Bumpass, 2012), and mortality (Drefahl, 2012). Fulfilling and satisfying partnerships protect individuals from loneliness (De Jong Gierveld, Broese van Groenou, Hoogendoorn, & Smit, 2009) and may also function as an avenue through which many other contacts are established and maintained.

Positive experiences with parents during childhood may ease the partnering process for young adults. Individuals with positive relationship histories might be equipped with social and cognitive competencies that allow and influence the formation of positive and stable romantic relationships. From an attachment perspective, being involved in a stable and satisfying romantic relationship may enable adults with negative childhood experiences to alter their insecure internal representations with respect to relationships from a skeptic to a more trustworthy approach (Feeney, 2008; Simpson, Collins, & Salvatore, 2011).

The benefits individuals experience from romantic relationships are distinct from those of other social bonds. In other words, the romantic relationship has a unique position in the social networks of human adults and offers protection and care (Zeifman & Hazan, 2008). It usually is a close and significant relationship through which individual behavior and other relationships both with kin and non-kin may be shaped.

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