Using adult attachment theory to differentiate adult children's internal working models of later life filial relationships

D. Shemmings

Middlesex University, London, UK, EN3 4SA

Abstract

During the past fifty years, research based on attachment theory has found that when relational partners' attachment systems are activated, significant differences emerge between the ways individuals respond to each other. These different attachment styles are related to the ways individuals characterise and conceptualise close relationships generally, referred to as 'internal representations'. Internal representations of close relationships depend heavily upon whether individuals have a secure or insecure attachment style. Until recently, most attachment-based research has focused either on the parent–child relationship during infancy, or on adult romantic relationships. Attachment researchers are now turning their attention to the parent–'child' relationship during the later stages of life. Later life filial relationships are of intrinsic interest to attachment researchers because they concern the same adults who were instrumental in forming the attachment organisation of the young child. This study considers filial attachments from the perspective of the adult 'child'. Twenty-four participants were selected using the *Attachment Style Questionnaire* (*ASQ*) to include equal numbers of the three main attachment organisations. Six robust factors emerged, accounting for 71% of the variation. *Confident Resolution* and *Resolved Yearning* incorporated the secure attachment organisation. *Distant Irritation* and *Dutiful Loyalty* captured the insecure-avoidant style, with *Unresolved Yearning* and *Entangled Resentment* comprising insecure-ambivalent individuals.
© 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In addition to needing practical help and financial security during later life, individuals also tend to value the emotional support of close family and friends (Cicirelli, 1983; Seeman & Crimmins, 2001). This appears to be especially true for the 'oldest-old' cohort (Krause, 2004). Research based on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1979) has consistently produced robust findings demonstrating that emotional availability towards others is strongly associated with early attachment experiences (Van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1997). Consequently, the emotional availability and interplay of attachment patterns between adult 'children' and their parents is of particular interest, because the latter usually performed the key roles in the attachment development of the former.

For the most part, however, gerontological research has tended to overlook the differential effects of secure and insecure attachment organisation on relationships during later life (Bradley & Cafferty, 2001; Consedine & Magai,

---

2003; Kraus & Haverkamp, 1996; Sorensen, Webster, & Roggman, 2002). Given that prevalence studies examining the distribution of attachment styles in large populations (e.g. Mickelson, Kessler, & Shaver, 1997: $n = 8098$) regularly report a 60:40 split between attachment security and insecurity respectively, potentially significant findings may have been cancelled out as a result of not differentiating later life relationships according to attachment organisation. And because attachment *in*security subdivides further into the relatively evenly distributed 'avoidant' and 'ambivalent' styles, each one recognisable by marked different internal representations of relationships and attachment behaviour, the argument for differentiation is strengthened (Bowlby, 1979; 1988).

During infancy, attachment styles operate pre-consciously and instinctually, but as the growing child acquires cognitive skills s/he also develops internalised expectations – 'internalised mental representations', or 'internal working models' (Bretherton & Mulholland, 1999) – about how s/he should behave, and how others are likely to respond, when the attachment system is activated. Such activation occurs in situations when the child is anxious, experiences separation or needs to feel close to an attachment figure. As a result, how individuals perceive, process and eventually resolve stressful events and circumstances are closely connected to the developing infant's early formative experiences of how they first learned to achieve proximity to primary caregivers (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2004). Consequently, in adulthood, attachment theory and research routinely differentiates individual close relational preferences (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985), affect regulation (Feeney, 1995), and information processing (Fraley & Shaver, 1997) into one of the three attachment 'styles'.

Attachment researchers have developed a growing interest in later life filial relationships (Bradley & Cafferty, 2001; Consedine & Magai, 2003; Magai, Consedine, Gillespie, O'Neal, & Vilker, 2004) precisely because they usually involve the same individuals who were present at birth; but, as adults, each is able to give, receive *and* reciprocate within the relationship, and therefore different attachment dynamics are produced. Studies have already been undertaken into attachment and felt obligation/subjective burden (Cicirelli, 1993; Finley, Roberts & Banahan, 1988; Hamon & Blieszner, 1990; Stein et al., 1998), and caregiving and attachments between adult offspring and their older parents (Antonucci, 1994; Cicirelli, 1981, 1983, 1993; Crawford, Bond, & Balshaw, 1994; Sorensen et al., 2002) — some of which have focused upon caregiving situations involving people with dementia (e.g. Miessen, 1993; Steele, 2000). Each study confirms the importance of distinguishing between secure and insecure attachments when analysing outcomes.

This article reports on research exploring adult children's attachment styles and internal representations of their relationship to their parent during later life. I conclude by discussing some of the implications for adult children's emotional availability in situations when their attachment system is activated.

1.1. Differences in individuals' attachment organisation

Having broken away from a prevailing psychoanalytic tradition relying on instinctual drive-reduction mechanisms to explain infant bonding, John Bowlby went on to articulate two complementary components of the attachment process. Initially functioning to protect the child from harm or threat, a primary attachment figure also provides a secure base from which the child can explore the environment (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1979); but it was the interdependence of security *and* exploration that constituted Bowlby's focal discovery. The growing infant's facility for creatively discovering its immediate world of people and environment varies directly with the extent to which s/he can routinely 'touch base', knowing that s/he will not be rebuffed (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999). The gentle guidance and unobtrusive supervision offered by a sensitive primary caregiver helps create the conditions for the child's subsequent forays into a potentially dangerous environment, whereas consistent, or inconsistent, rejection by a primary caregiver disrupts this dynamic and results in the child experiencing insecurity about how best to maintain proximity to the caregiver, which in the early years of an infant's life is essential to its survival. Furthermore, 'the manner in which the caregiver responds, or does not respond, to the child's emotional signals constitutes one of the most influential factors in the quality of attachment that develops' (Magai et al., 2004, p. 390).

Three 'styles' of attachment were found through extensive observation which consistently accounted for a range of attachment-related behaviour. They comprised one secure and two insecure patterns — the *anxious–avoidant* and *anxious–ambivalent* styles (Sperling & Berman, 1994). The *Secure* pattern is characterised by children who are able to depend upon and trust adults and who, simultaneously, develop perceptions of self as lovable. Children who develop an *Avoidant* pattern turn away from others when under threat because, from an early stage, primary caregivers consistently discouraged or rejected the display of feelings. In times of crisis they de-activate attachment-related behaviour by