



Revisiting the Bird's Nest Drawing assessment: Toward a global approach



Limor Goldner

Graduate School of Creative Art Therapies, University of Haifa, Israel Faculty of Education, Oranim College of Education, Haifa, Israel

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ABSTRACT

The Bird's Nest Drawing (BND) (Kaiser, 1996. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 23, 333–340) is an art-based technique to assess attachment security. In the past 15 years, several studies have tested the validity of the BND mainly in adult clinical populations. In an attempt to strengthen the validity of the measure in children, the current study examined the associations between the BND and two other frequently used assessment techniques evaluating attachment security: Kaplan and Main's (1986. Instructions for the classification of children's family drawings in terms of representation of attachment. Berkeley, CA: University of California) Family Drawing Coding System and the Attachment Security Questionnaire (Kerns et al., 1996. *Developmental Psychology*, 32, 457–466) on a sample of elementary-school age children ($n = 81$) in Israel. BNDs were scored using specific indicators as well as global rating scales. The findings point to associations between the children's self-reported security score, and the BND indicators and global scales. Similarly, scores on both the specific indicators and global scales in family drawings were correlated with the BND global scales. Levels of BND scales varied as a function of the children's attachment orientations derived from their family drawings. Associations were also found between attachment orientations based on family and BND drawings. Results were interpreted as supporting the use of a global approach of rating in addition to a sign-based approach.

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Introduction

The Bird's Nest Drawing (Kaiser, 1996; BND) is an art-based technique grounded in Attachment Theory which is used to assess attachment representations models. The current study briefly reviews Attachment Theory, delineates the significant findings from previous studies, and reports on the results of an attempt to validate the BND in elementary school-age children using specific indicators in addition to a global perspective of rating.

Attachment theory

Attachment Theory posits that beginning in infancy, and continuing throughout the lifespan, an individual's mental health and capacity to form close relationships are intimately linked to previous relationships with attachment figures that provide emotional support and protection (Belsky & Cassidy, 1994; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). According to this theory, children's actual experiences shape their representational models, which

subsequently serve to guide their behavior in novel circumstances (Bowlby, 1980). Children experiencing sensitive and responsive care will develop trust in others, comfort with closeness and adaptive ways of dealing with stress (secure attachment); avoidant attachment is associated with discomfort with closeness and an inclination for self-reliance, whereas anxious (ambivalent) attachment is associated with an intense desire for closeness and constant concern about parental availability (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2006). Children with disorganized attachment are characterized by an apparent lack, or collapse, of a consistent organized strategy for dealing with stress. The particular forms and mixtures of disorganized behaviors tend to be idiosyncratic from child to child, but include anxious, helpless, or depressed behaviors, unexpected fluctuations of approach and avoidance toward the attachment figure, and other conflicted and unpredictable behaviors (see Main & Solomon, 1990).

As children get older, the attachment system develops toward increased self-reliance on the part of the child in that older children are better at coping with stress situations and are less dependent on parents (Marvin & Britner, 1999). Moreover, there may be a change in the goal of the attachment system, with availability rather than proximity of the attachment figure becoming the aim of the organization (Bowlby, 1987, cited in Ainsworth, 1990; Kerns, Tomich,

E-mail address: limor.goldner@gmail.com

Aspelmeier, & Contreras, 2000; Lieberman, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 1999). Nevertheless, despite these changes, children continue to need and rely on parents as attachment figures (Bowlby, 1979), and individual differences in attachment security, expressed in emotional regulation and exploration, have important implications for personality development as well as for adjustment (Weinfeld, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 2008).

In general, attachment security facilitates resilient functioning and serves as a buffer when coping with adversities, whereas insecure attachment might hamper children's adjustment. For instance, substantial evidence indicates that elementary school age children with secure attachment develop better social-emotional competence (Granot & Mayseless, 2001; Ranson & Urchuk, 2008). They have more constructive coping mechanisms, better regulation of emotion in the classroom (Kerns, Abraham, Schlegelmilch, & Morgan, 2007), and better behavioral adjustment (Granot & Mayseless, 2001). Attachment security is also associated with social competence (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2006; Kerns, Tomich, & Kim, 2006), and with social support and peer acceptance (Granot & Mayseless, 2001; Kerns, Kelpac, & Cole, 1996). Security of attachment was negatively associated with children's loneliness (Kerns & Stevens, 1995; Kerns et al., 1996) and less depressive symptomatology (Graham & Easterbrooks, 2000). In addition, a strong association was found between insecure attachment and early behavioral problems, anti-social behavior, disruptive hyperactive behavior (Lyons-Ruth, 1996), and subsequent conduct disorder (Greenberg & Speltz, 1988; Greenberg, Speltz, Deklyen, & Endriga, 1991).

Projective art based techniques to evaluate attachment security

Given the severity of psychological and social-behavioral symptoms experienced by insecurely attached children, it seems crucial to better understand the representations of insecurely attached children in their elementary school years (Cicchetti, Toth, & Bush, 1988). Diverse instruments are available to help healthcare professionals assess attachment orientation in these children using self-report measures of attachment security (Kerns et al., 1996) or avoidant and preoccupied coping strategies (Finnegan, Hodges, & Perry, 1996). However, completion of these questionnaires requires the cooperation of the child, who often attempts to conceal his or her negative experience with his/her caregivers. In these cases, potential deterioration into a clinical situation may be more difficult to detect.

Given the shortcomings of self-report questionnaires, in the last thirty years two art-based projective assessments have been developed to evaluate children's attachment security: Kaplan and Main's (1986) Family Drawing Coding system and Kaiser's (1996) Bird Nest Drawing. These approaches are grounded on the assumption that drawing is a natural mode of expression for children. Long before children verbalize their feelings and thoughts into words, they express both conscious and unconscious attitudes, wishes, and concerns in symbolic methods such as drawing. It thus seems plausible that representations of attachment experiences would be revealed in drawings, and, specifically, that the child's "inner working models" (Bowlby, 1973) of the self, caregivers, and the self with caregivers would be manifested (Fury, Carelson, & Sraufe, 1997).

Classification of attachment representations through family drawings

Kaplan and Main's (1986) sign-based coding system for analyzing children's family drawings contains a set of indicators that classifies children's family drawings according to their attachment security. The researchers studied family drawings by kindergarten children as predictors of assignment to the secure or insecure

attachment categories and developed a classification system for coding a sample of children's family drawings that matched, with 76% accuracy, their Strange Situation classifications (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

The results showed that drawings by children reflecting *secure* attachment are realistic; figures are complete, grounded and centered, and individuated (figures seem unique and are not drawn exactly alike). There is a natural proximity among family members and an impression of happiness in the family. Drawings by children classified as *avoidant* try to convey a positive picture, emphasizing invulnerability and happiness. Arms may be absent or drawn in a way that does not allow holding, there is lack of individuation of the figures and lack of movement in the picture. Drawings by children classified as *ambivalent* include figures that are extremely large or small, and figures that either overlap or are separated by barriers. Soft body parts and facial features are exaggerated in the drawings. Finally, drawings assigned to the *disorganized* classification often include strange marks, threatening and fantasy themes, unfinished objects or figures, and sometimes excessive and irrational sweetness (Kaplan & Main, 1986).

Based on Kaplan and Main's (1986) coding system, Fury et al. (1997) developed a global approach for coding children's family drawings using eight global rating scales. These scales consist of two positive dimensions (vitality/creativity and family pride/happiness) and six negative dimensions (vulnerability, emotional distance/isolation, tension/anger, role reversal, bizarreness/dissociation, and global pathology).

Although difficult and time-consuming, this system has been shown to have reliability and validity for determining attachment categories (Kaiser & Deaver, 2009). For instance, Carlson, Sroufe, and Egeland (2004) conducted a longitudinal study in which children's family drawings at age 8 were found to correlate with their attachment classifications according to data gathered from previous interviews with the children when they were in preschool and again at age 12 ($p < .001$). The global rating scales were also correlated with children's attachment classifications as assessed in infancy ($p < .001$). The analysis showed that even after controlling for IQ, current life stress, and emotional functioning, the children's early attachment history made a significant contribution to the prediction of negative dimensions in their drawings ($p < .001$) (Fury et al., 1997). In another study (Madigan, Ladd, & Goldberg, 2003), children whose family drawings depicted higher levels of emotional distance, vulnerability, and parent-child role reversal were found to have an insecure attachment history, whereas family drawings that scored higher on family pride and lower in global pathology were drawn by children with a secure attachment history ($p < .05-.01$).

Recently, researchers have started using Kaplan and Main's (1986) coding system to assess the associations between children's attachment classifications as manifested in their family drawings and children's adjustment. The findings suggest better adjustment in the social, academic and behavioral realms among securely attached children. For example, kindergarten children ($n = 200$) whose drawings were judged as secure were rated as more sociable with their peers, more task-oriented and more socially competent than insecurely ambivalent children ($p < .05-.01$) (Pianta, Longmaid, & Ferguson, 1999). The superior functioning of securely attached children was also evidenced in 9–12 year old Israelis ($n = 222$) who exhibited higher levels of pro-social behavior and fewer conduct problems than their counterparts ($p < .05-.01$) (Goldner & Scharf, 2011).

A previous study (Goldner & Scharf, 2012) designed to detect children's adjustment found that indicators reflecting attachment insecurity such as omitting and adding figure parts, adding bizarre marks, as well as a lack of femininity were correlated with internalizing problems among Israeli elementary school age children

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