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Infant capacities related to building internal working models of attachment figures: A theoretical and empirical review



Laura J. Sherman, Katherine Rice, Jude Cassidy *

Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA

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ABSTRACT

According to attachment theory (e.g., Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980), infants develop cognitive models (termed internal working models, IWMs) of their attachment figures during the first year of life. Bowlby proposed his initial thinking about IWMs as more of an outline than a fully defined concept (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). As such, considerable subsequent theoretical and empirical works have aimed to increase understanding of how IWMs operate (e.g., Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). To date, however, relatively little research has explored infant cognition with respect to the development of the IWM. In this review, we summarize the IWM concept as it applies to caregiver-specific attachment representations in infancy, review research examining cognitive capacities relevant to building these caregiver-specific representations, and provide directions for future research. We bridge social and cognitive developmental literatures and suggest ways in which researchers can continue to examine these representations. Both attachment researchers and social cognitive researchers can learn from each others' theoretical models and methodologies to understand development at the intersection of social, emotional, and cognitive development in infancy.

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Introduction

During the first year of life, infants undergo significant physical, social, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development while simultaneously forming enduring, person-specific, emotionally salient

* Corresponding author. Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA. Fax: 301-314-9566. E-mail address: jcassidy@umd.edu (J. Cassidy).

relationships with their primary caregivers, known as attachment bonds (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Although virtually all infants form attachments to their primary caregivers, the patterns of the attachments differ, and these patterns are significantly affected by a variety of factors, including differences in the quality of caregiving (Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 2008). Infants who experience sensitive and responsive care tend to develop secure attachments, whereas infants who experience rejecting, hostile, punitive, inconsistent, frightening, or intrusive care often develop various forms of insecure attachment (Weinfield et al., 2008). According to attachment theory, the mechanism through which children translate caregiving experiences into an attachment pattern is via experience-based mental representations of their caregivers' likely behavior (known broadly as *internal working models*, IWMs; Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980; see Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). As a result of receiving sensitive and responsive care, infants with a secure pattern of attachment build an IWM that represents confidence in their caregivers' ability to serve as both a *secure base* from which to explore and as a *haven of safety* to return to in times of need (Ainsworth, 1967; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982), whereas insecurely attached infants lack confidence in one or both of these caregiving roles.

To date, the majority of research on the IWM concept has focused on adults and verbal children, with very little research examining the development of these mental representations in infancy. In fact, the IWM concept was overlooked for many years by infancy researchers (Thompson, 2008). In this review, however, we suggest, as have others (see Johnson et al., 2010), that infants' IWMs can be studied, especially given methodological advances and accumulating research on infant memory and social cognition. Applying the insight yielded by these advances in understanding infant cognition to the formation of attachment bonds dovetails with psychology's recent increasing interest in bridging traditional social-emotional and cognitive development research (e.g., Calkins & Bell, 2010; Olson & Dweck, 2008). Both attachment researchers and social cognitive researchers can learn from each others' theoretical models and methodologies to understand child development at the intersection of social, emotional, and cognitive development in infancy.

Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to (a) describe the features and formation of the infants' IWMs from the perspective of attachment theory, specifically focusing on infants' mental representations of *specific* caregivers' likely behavior; (b) review empirical research examining cognitive capacities relevant to building these models in the first year of life (see Thompson, Laible, & Ontai, 2003, for a discussion of relevant cognitive capacities during the preschool years) and (c) provide suggestions and recommendations for future research to examine the capacities in relation to IWMs of attachment. In doing so, the goal is not to provide a comprehensive review of each cognitive capacity (especially given that many of these capacities have been comprehensively reviewed elsewhere; e.g., see Bauer, 2006, for event memory), but instead to highlight aspects of the infancy literature that are relevant to the IWM concept (we use the terms *infancy* and *infants* to refer to the first year of life). This is the first review to critically examine whether existing research supports the hypothesis that infants can form experience-based caregiver-specific mental representations of the caregiver's likely behavior.

Attachment theory: the internal working model concept

What are internal working models (IWMs) and how do they develop?

Internal working models (IWMs) of attachment are experience-based mental representations about attachment figures, the self, and relationships. Bowlby (1969/1982) used the term *attachment figures* to describe the principal people to whom one becomes attached (noting that the initial [i.e., primary] attachment figures are typically the parents, grandparents, and other family members). According to Bowlby (1969/1982), these representations form during the infant's first year of life:

Starting, we may suppose, towards the end of his first year ... a child is busy constructing working models of how the physical world may be expected to behave, how his mother and other significant persons may be expected to behave, how he himself may be expected to behave, and how each interacts with the other (p. 354).

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