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Examining developmental fit of the Adult Attachment Interview in adolescence

Kelly A. Warmuth *, E. Mark Cummings

Department of Psychology, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, USA

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ABSTRACT

When measuring attachment security, considering the developmental period of interest is imperative when deciding which measure of attachment to use. In the current review, we note a lack of fit between the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) – which is widely regarded as the gold standard for assessing attachment in adolescence – and the stage-salient experiences of adolescence. First, we explore how some of these normative experiences complicate assessment of attachment in adolescence. Second, we review the tenets of the AAI and detail its use with teenagers. Third, we investigate attachment in the context of multiple key developmental tasks of adolescence, including maintaining open communication, self-concept and identity formation, deidealization of parents, autonomy development, the shift of attachment behavior toward peers, and advances in executive functioning through development of the prefrontal cortex. After noting incongruences between those tasks and the AAI, additional weaknesses to using the AAI in adolescence are considered, including: (1) the "generalized state of mind," (2) reliance on retrospectively reporting childhood experiences with parents, and (3) the apparent abundance of dismissing individuals. Considering the presented evidence, we resolve that the AAI – although a well-established measure of adult attachment – is not a good fit to the developmental stage of adolescence and thus, the development of other assessments of parent–adolescent attachment is needed. We conclude by making suggestions for future assessments of parent–child attachment in adolescence.

* Corresponding author. Department of Psychology, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA. Fax: (574) 631-1825.
E-mail address: kellywarmuth@gmail.com (K.A. Warmuth).

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Introduction

Attachment theory, as defined originally by Bowlby (1958, 1969, 1973, 1980, 1982, 1988), stipulates that for social and emotional development to occur normally, children and infants need to develop a relationship with at least one primary caregiver. Since its inception, implications of attachment theory have been extended through adulthood and parent–child attachment has continued to be a strong predictor of a myriad of outcomes (for reviews, see DeKlyen & Greenberg, 2008; Dozier, Stovall-McClough, & Albus, 2008). Extending beyond the parent–child dyad, early attachment relationships with parents have also been shown to predict relationships with peers (Allen, Moore, Kuperminc, & Bell, 1998; Cohn, 1990; Coleman, 2003; Schneider, Atkinson, & Tardif, 2001; Sroufe, 2005; Youngblade & Belsky, 1989), as well as later romantic partners (Collins & Read, 1990; Crowell & Owens, 1998; Doyle, Lawford, & Markiewicz, 2009; Hazan, Campa, & Gur-Yaish, 2006; Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1994; Kobak & Hazan, 1991). One notable reason for attachment theory's empirical success as a conceptual model for influences on youth development thus far – in addition to its applicability to a wide array of research questions – has been the methodologically rigorous assessments used to measure attachment security in each developmental period.

As children develop cognitive sophistication, improve motor capacities, and increase their engagement with the world of peers, the nature of the parent–child attachment relationship also develops. These changes, however, pose a challenge to researchers, as measuring parent–child attachment longitudinally with a singular method poses significant conceptual and assessment problems and challenges (Cicchetti, Cummings, Greenberg, & Marvin, 1990). Considering that attachment is a lifelong construct, the creation of multiple assessments – each targeted to the desired developmental period – is imperative to research in this area (Koski & Shaver, 1997; Posada, 2006). For such reasons, researchers created the Strange Situation for infancy (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978); the Separation–Reunion Procedure (SRP; Cassidy, 1988; Main & Cassidy, 1988; Marvin & Van Devender, 1978), Attachment Q-Set (AQS; Waters & Deane, 1985), MacArthur Story Stem Battery (MSSB; Bretherton, Oppenheim, Buchsbaum, Emde, & The MacArthur Narrative Group, 1990), and Separation Anxiety Test (SAT; Klagsbrun & Bowlby, 1976) for childhood; and the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1985, 1996) for adulthood. The AAI was later extended downward to adolescence and has come to be widely regarded as the "gold standard" for assessing attachment in adolescence (Hesse, 1999, 2008). However, as children transition from one developmental stage to another, new developmental competencies (e.g., autonomy, executive function, and identity formation) impact the operation of the attachment system and thus, incorporating these unfolding capabilities into parent–child attachment assessments is imperative to assessment validity (Cicchetti et al., 1990).

Upon closer examination of the stage-salient issues of adolescence, disconnects are apparent between assessment based on the AAI and the characteristics of the developmental period of adolescence. Therefore, in the current review, we explore the characteristics and challenges of adolescence and question the developmental fit of the AAI for this age period. In addition, we present future directions and methodological considerations for ensuring reliable and valid assessment of parent–adolescent attachment.

Adolescence

Adolescence is a period of profound transformation, as the nature of attachment becomes more reciprocal with the adolescent no longer being just a recipient of care from parents, but also a provider (Allen, 2008; Allen & Land, 1999). Considering the dramatic changes that occur in the adolescent and in the parent–adolescent attachment relationship, examining attachment in the context of the developmental changes of adolescence is essential to make sense of seemingly conflicted or contradictory behavior toward attachment figures (Allen & Land, 1999). For example, although adolescents may appear to view their attachment bonds to parents as ties that restrain rather than secure bases (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Allen & Land, 1999; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986), maintaining the parent as a secure base and continuing the goal-corrected partnership are likely to help the adolescent explore his or her autonomy (Allen & Land, 1999; Allen et al., 2003; Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Hazan & Zeifman, 1999). Therefore, seeming attempts to create distance in the parent–adolescent relationship may actually be adolescents' normative strides toward the development of autonomy.