



Development of attachment orientations in response to childbirth: A longitudinal dyadic perspective☆



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ABSTRACT

The aim of the current paper was to investigate the influence of childbirth on parents' attachment orientations. A three-wave longitudinal research program (during the second trimester of pregnancy, at 6 months postpartum, and at 1 year postpartum) using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model with a hierarchical linear modeling was conducted on 150 parental couples ($M = 30.38$ years old) with parental group (i.e., primiparous/first-time or multiparous/multi-times parents) as a time-invariant predictor and the partner's attachment development as a time-varying covariate. Results showed that parents' attachment orientations were stable. Moreover, the members of a parental couple tended to follow the same attachment developmental trajectory. Variation in the partners' anxiety was positively associated with variation in the parents' anxiety and avoidance, while variation in the partners' avoidance was not associated with variation in the parents' anxiety and avoidance. The discussion underlined the stability of attachment orientations around childbirth and the importance of the dyadic perspective in understanding the childbirth experience, specifically the parents' receptivity to variation in their partners' anxiety levels and the influence of such variation on their own anxiety and avoidance development.

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Childbirth is considered the most challenging life event couples face (Feeney, Hohaus, Noller, & Alexander, 2001) and as a moment at which changes in attachment orientations are likely to be observed (Bowlby, 1988). Until now, scholars have focused on the development of attachment orientations during the transition to parenthood from the perspective of individual mothers or fathers. The current study aimed to examine the particular effect of childbirth on primiparous (i.e., first-time) and multiparous (i.e., multiple-time) parents' attachment orientations using a dyadic approach.

1. Adult attachment theory

Over the course of repeated interactions with their first caregivers during childhood, an individual constructs internal working models of attachment which are then internalized as sets of expectations about himself or herself (i.e., whether he or she is or is not worthy of love and care from attachment figures) and significant others (i.e., whether attachment figures were or were not likely to be loving and supportive in important situations). These working models were thought to influence one's perceptions of—and behaviors in—later relationships

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(Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). Two orthogonal dimensions referred to adult attachment (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998): anxiety (i.e., measuring the degree to which individuals worried that their close relatives did not really love them and might be unavailable or unsupportive in stressful situations) and avoidance (i.e., measuring the degree to which individuals desired limited intimacy with, and strived to remain psychologically and emotionally independent from, close relatives). Previous research showed the association between parents' attachment orientations and perceptions of and responses to childbirth. For example, Wilson, Rholes, Simpson, and Tran (2007) found that highly anxious parents felt greater jealousy toward their babies than did less anxious parents. Parents with a high level of avoidance perceived parenting as less satisfying and personally meaningful (Rholes, Simpson, & Friedman, 2006). However, such studies did not question the development of attachment orientations during childbirth.

2. Childbirth and change in attachment orientations

The life-event model of change (Davila & Cobb, 2004) assumed that change in attachment occurred in response to emotionally and relationally significant life events, especially events that changed the nature of a relationship or that affected relationship status, such as childbirth. Bowlby (1988) had already argued that childbirth was a moment at which systematic changes in attachment orientations were likely to be witnessed, for three reasons. First, the emotionally and interpersonally taxing nature of having a child ought to make people more receptive

to re-evaluating, updating, and perhaps revising their internal working models of attachment. Second, childbirth should revive significant attachment-related memories and issues that, again, tended to make individuals more receptive. Finally, this event exposed parents to many new personal and interpersonal experiences that ought to contradict their current beliefs, expectations, and views of others and self.

Further, the social investment principle (Roberts, Wood, & Smith, 2005) posited that investing oneself in a social institution such as parenthood entails assuming new roles as a parent which leads to increased expectations and demands on the part of others—in this case, of the baby, especially. These expectations might include responsibility to others, confidence, prosocial behaviors, and emotional stability which lead to growth and increased maturity (Demick, 2002). This principle has been applied in studying parents' personality development (Hutteman et al., 2014). Yet Donnellan, Burt, Levendosky, and Klump (2008) have reported that a substantial majority of the covariance in attachment and personality appeared to be due to shared genetic influences and that the mechanisms underlying personality and attachment development could be similar (i.e., person-environment transactions and gene-environment correlations) (Caspi & Shiner, 2006; Scarr & McCartney, 1983). Therefore, the social investment principle may be applied to attachment theory to explain the influence of childbirth on attachment development.

The life-event model of change and the social investment principle assumed that childbirth led parents to experience changes in their attachment orientations in response to the interpersonally and emotionally taxing nature of this event and to accommodate the baby's and the family's demands. The normative nature of childbirth led individuals to develop similar expectations of maturation attendant to childbirth (e.g., expectations of increased responsibility, sensitivity) which would drive parents to develop toward a more well-adapted attachment profile. Hereby, we could assume this maturational process would lead to more security and then to a lesser level of anxious and avoidant attachment after childbirth.

3. Empirical study of the development of attachment during the transition to parenthood

Despite these theoretical considerations, very few empirical studies considered the influence of childbirth on attachment orientations. In a two-wave longitudinal study (i.e., 6 weeks before and 6 months after childbirth), Simpson, Rholes, Campbell, and Wilson (2003) showed that parents who perceived a pre-to-postnatal increase of their partner's support became significantly less anxious across the transition. In another two-wave longitudinal study (i.e., pregnancy and 1 year postpartum), Cobb, Davila, Rothman, Lawrence, and Bradbury (submitted for publication) showed that parents who perceived relatives as being supportive during the transition demonstrated increases in self-reported security. Both studies highlighted the developmental nature of attachment orientations during the transition to parenthood. However, some limitations needed to be addressed in the current study. First, the programs were two-wave and longitudinal while it might be relevant to observe developmental trajectories by examining both short-term and long-term changes by including three waves (i.e., second trimester of pregnancy, 6 months postpartum, and 1 year postpartum). Second, the two previous studies focused on the transition to parenthood. The current study attempted to differentiate two life events: that of the transition to parenthood and of having additional children. Both life events included a change of relational status and the development of new responsibilities, roles, and identities (Delmore-Ko, 2000; Galinsky, 1981). The first-time parents changed from a dyadic (couple) to a triadic (family) perspective, but the multiparous parents developed relationships with siblings (Yu & Gamble, 2008). Primiparous and multiparous parents were therefore included in the current study. The inclusion of childless couples was required to find out whether changes in attachment orientation were unique to

couples with children. Finally, previous studies were on changes in perceptions about social support and their influence on attachment orientations during the transition to parenthood. However, such changes of perception could be due to attachment change during the transition to parenthood and did not account for mutual influence between partners. Scholars have focused on an individual perspective (i.e., the effect of the transition to parenthood on women and men, separately) and have neglected the fact that one of the defining features of a couple is interdependence (i.e., one partner's experiences may be related to the other partner's experiences) (Atkins, 2005; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Keizer and Schenk (2012) have already shown that women's and men's relationship satisfaction within couples was similarly affected by childbirth and changed in tandem. Such a dyadic perspective led us to apply developmental measures both to the individual (i.e., the actor's attachment) and to his or her close relational environment (i.e., the partner's attachment) (Sameroff, 2009) and to observe if and to what extent the couple members' experiences were interdependent.

4. Current study and hypotheses

Three hypotheses were considered in the current three-wave longitudinal study (pregnancy, 6 months postpartum, and 1 year postpartum) based both on parents' and childless adults' self-reported measures on the anxiety and avoidance dimensions of attachment. The first objective was to test intra-individual change in attachment orientations around childbirth. Previous studies (Cobb et al., submitted for publication; Simpson et al., 2003) were only two-wave longitudinal and did not compare parents' trajectory to that of childless adults. The current study was the first one to analyze the developmental trajectory of attachment orientations around childbirth with a 3-wave longitudinal program and comparing to that of childless adults. Based on the life-event model of change and the social investment principle, we first hypothesized that parents develop toward a more well-adapted attachment profile, hence toward more security. We expected a decrease of both attachment orientations after childbirth with a larger decrease of avoidance. Under these assumptions, attachment change should occur especially when individuals encounter new relational information incongruent with their working models (Bowlby, 1988). Childbirth would be such an event to disconfirm the avoidant working models (i.e., the need to be psychologically and emotionally independent from close relatives), because it leads to more physical and emotional proximity between the parent and the newborn. In comparison, given the absence of life-event and new social roles (i.e., as controlled in the current study), we expected an absence of attachment change in the childless group.

Second, parental group (i.e., primiparity and multiparity) was added as a predictor of the intra-individual attachment development in order to observe whether primiparous and multiparous parents experienced different patterns of change. Attachment orientations would tend to change during the transition to parenthood (Cobb et al., submitted for publication; Simpson et al., 2003). Consequently, we expected a decrease in avoidance and anxiety for primiparous parents. No study has yet focused on the developmental trajectory of multiparous parents' attachment orientations. However, having another newborn leads to significant relational changes (according to the life-event model of change) and new family expectancies (social investment principle), which led us to expect a decrease in avoidance and anxiety for multiparous parents, too. So, we hypothesized the same developmental trajectory for both primiparous and multiparous parents.

The last objective consisted in testing the relation between a parent's attachment development and that of his or her partner. Since childbirth is a shared and interdependent experience within the parental couple and attachment orientations are interpersonal constructs, a positive association between one parent's attachment development

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