



# Not all attachment relationships develop alike: Normative cross-sectional age trajectories in attachment to romantic partners, best friends, and parents



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## ABSTRACT

Previous research has found that age is negatively correlated with general-romantic attachment anxiety and positively correlated with general-romantic attachment avoidance. The present study examined cross-sectional age trajectories in global attachment, as well as relationship-specific attachment with romantic partners, best friends, mothers, and fathers. Across all specific relationships, older individuals reported higher attachment avoidance. In contrast, attachment anxiety with romantic partners and friends was negatively associated with age, whereas attachment anxiety with parents normatively increased as a function of age. These findings underscore the importance of examining the normative age trajectories of attachment across both global and specific levels of abstraction.

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## 1. Introduction

Attachment theory was originally developed to explain the emotional bonds that develop between infants and their primary caregivers (Bowlby, 1951). Nonetheless, Bowlby quickly came to the realization that attachment dynamics are not limited to infant–caregiver relationships. Rather, he proposed that attachment is a fundamental feature of people's social and emotional experiences across the lifespan—“from the cradle to the grave” (Bowlby, 1969, p. 208). Indeed, a large body of research now exists examining individual differences in attachment *working models*—beliefs and expectations regarding close relationships—and how those working models predict the types of relational goals people pursue in adulthood (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), relationship functioning and well-being with romantic partners (e.g., Simpson & Rholes, 2010) and friends (e.g., Bauminger, Finzi-Dottan, Chason, & Har-Even, 2008; Grabill & Kerns, 2000), ability to adapt to crises (e.g., Fraley, Fazzari, Bonanno, & Dekel, 2006), biases in perception and memory (e.g., Collins, 2006; Fraley & Brumbaugh, 2007; Simpson, Rholes, & Winterheld, 2009), and a host of other important life

and relationship outcomes (for an overview, see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Because of its relevance to understanding a wide array of phenomena, an increasing number of researchers have argued that it is important to examine how the security of working models varies normatively across the life course (e.g., Chopik & Edelstein, 2014; Chopik, Edelstein, & Fraley, 2013; Magai, 2008). Specifically, scholars have postulated that commonly shared, age-graded life experiences—such as gaining independence from one's parents or investment in romantic relationships—might sculpt most people's attachment representations in similar ways over the life course, producing normative developmental trends (Chopik & Edelstein, 2014; Chopik et al., 2013; Magai, 2008). To this end, several studies have examined cross-sectional age differences in the working models people hold about romantic relationships in general and have found that, on average, older individuals report higher levels of attachment avoidance (i.e., a discomfort with closeness and dependency) and lower levels of attachment anxiety (i.e., concerns about abandonment and one's own suitability as a romantic partner) (Birnbaum, 2007; Chopik et al., 2013; Diehl, Elnick, Bourbeau, & Labouvie-Vief, 1998; Mickelson, Kessler, & Shaver, 1997; Segal, Needham, & Coolidge, 2009). One recent study replicated these trends across more than 80 countries, suggesting that the development of attachment is similar across different social and cultural settings (Chopik & Edelstein, 2014). Furthermore, these patterns have also been observed in at least one extended longitudinal study, indicating that the cross-sectional correlations

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between age and attachment working models may partly represent true developmental processes, rather than reflecting cohort effects alone (Klohnen & John, 1998).

Although the specific processes underlying these developmental patterns are not well understood, scholars have speculated that they are likely attributable to a combination of maturation processes (e.g., normative declines in negative affectivity that occur with age; Roberts & Mroczek, 2008) as well as common, age-graded life experiences that affect people in similar ways (Chopik et al., 2013). For example, Chopik et al. (2013) argued that normative increases in avoidance—especially in young adulthood—might be driven by the process of becoming progressively less dependent on one’s parents. In contrast, normative declines in attachment anxiety may be the result of settling into enduring romantic relationships, in which fears of abandonment gradually diminish over time (see Eastwick & Finkel, 2008).

**2. Does normative development in attachment differ across relationship contexts?**

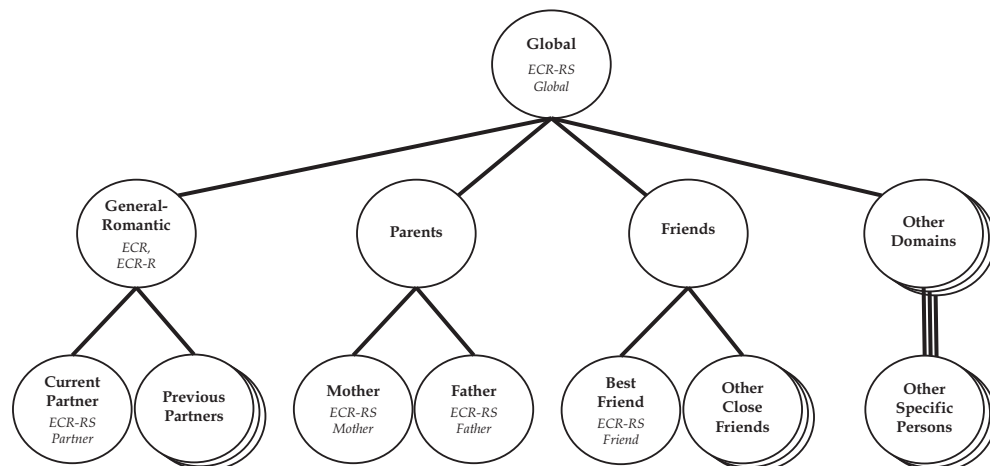
To date, all of the existing studies linking attachment working models to age have utilized measures of *general-romantic* attachment working models. Specifically, as can be seen in Fig. 1, the most prevalent measures of attachment—including the Experiences in Close Relationships scale (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) and its Revision (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000)—contain questions that ask people how they approach *romantic relationships in general*. Thus, these measures are “general” in the sense that they do not explicitly target how the respondent feels about a *specific person*, but they are not *global* because they clearly target the romantic domain rather than, for example, the parental domain.

However, scholars have recently emphasized the idea that attachment working models can vary across levels of specificity—ranging from, on the broader end, individuals’ *global* representations of people in general to, on the more narrow end, representations of specific individuals (e.g., specific romantic partners, mothers/fathers, specific peers) (Collins & Read, 1994; Sibley & Overall, 2008, 2010). One consequence of this idea is that it is possible for an individual to have a relatively secure relationship with his or her romantic partner, for example, but to have a considerably less secure relationship with his or her parents. Similarly, it is possible that even within one relational domain—romantic relationships—an individual might have a secure representation of close relationships in general, despite having a relatively insecure bond with a specific partner.

The fact that people’s attachment working models vary in terms of specificity raises the possibility that attachment working models in different relational domains (e.g., parental, romantic) might exhibit disparate developmental patterns over the life course. For example, although older individuals tend to report lower levels of general-romantic attachment anxiety (Birnbbaum, 2007; Chopik et al., 2013; Diehl et al., 1998; Mickelson et al., 1997; Segal et al., 2009), it is possible that age is positively correlated with attachment anxiety with respect to one’s parents. Indeed, the possibility that working models might develop in different ways in distinct relational contexts was anticipated by Chopik et al. (2013), who proposed that the positive correlation between age and attachment avoidance might be attributable to increasing desires for independence and other parental dynamics in young adulthood, whereas declines in anxiety with age might be akin to the numerous emotional benefits of investing in romantic relationships across the lifespan (e.g., Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Lehnart, Neyer, & Eccles, 2010).

Similarly, the development of people’s *global* working models may differ from that of their general-romantic and/or relationship-specific working models. Specifically, researchers in related fields have observed that global assessments (e.g., of well-being) can be constructed in either a bottom-up (e.g., aggregating across all information relevant to one’s well-being to form an overall assessment) or top-down fashion (e.g., relying on heuristics and intuitions about how happy one is) (e.g., Heller, Watson, & Ilies, 2004; Lucas & Diener, 2008). To the extent that people’s global working models are constructed in a bottom-up fashion, the correlations between age and global working models may simply represent some weighted average of the developmental patterns across people’s relationship-specific working models. In contrast, if people construct global working models in a top-down fashion—relying on heuristics, rather than summarizing across all relevant information in their lives—it is possible that people’s global working models may develop entirely independently of their more specific working models.

Despite the importance of understanding how people’s working models develop across different levels of specificity, to the best of our knowledge, no previous studies have explicitly examined the associations between age and attachment working models globally or with respect to specific relationship domains. To fill this gap in the empirical literature, we used the ECR-Relationships Structures (ECR-RS; Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2011) questionnaire to measure people’s working models with respect to close relationships globally, and also with respect to four specific individuals—their current romantic partners, best friends, mothers,



**Fig. 1.** The hierarchical organization of attachment working models, and measures that tap each level.

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