



Examining antecedents of infant attachment security with mothers and fathers: An ecological systems perspective[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Taking an ecological systems perspective, early parent–child relationships can be affected by interactions between systems where some are more proximally linked to the child than others. Socioeconomic status, a distal factor, is associated with social functioning during childhood, but research on its association with functioning during infancy, particularly attachment, is scant and inconsistent. Moreover, it is not clear how distal factors affect infant functioning. Other systems such as marital adjustment and parenting may moderate or mediate relations between distal factors and infant attachment. The current longitudinal study ($n = 135$) examined the role of various systems – parental resources, marital functioning, parental sensitivity and involvement – in early infancy (3-, 5-, 7-months) on infant–mother (12-months) and infant–father (14-months) attachment security. Findings supported moderating processes but in different ways for infant–mother versus infant–father dyads. Implications for future studies and interventions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Attachment is considered one of the most important goals in the socio-emotional development of children (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982; Sroufe, 1985). This emotional tie that a child has to a specific caregiver forms through his or her early patterns of social interactions during the first year of life (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982; Grossman, Grossman, & Kindler, 2005; Sroufe, 1985). Indeed, many studies of the infant–parent attachment relationship have examined the parent–child microsystem, and have found that aspects of parenting, such as parental sensitivity, relate to infant attachment security (e.g., Brown, McBride, Shin, & Bost, 2007). An ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), however, would also argue that early parent–child relationships can be affected by interactions between many systems where some are more proximally linked to the child than others. For example, socioeconomic status (SES) is generally considered a more distal factor but has been found to relate to parenting quality and children's social behavior (Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994). Other systems, such as the spousal relationship, may impact the parent–child system in either more distal or proximal ways. For example, marital satisfaction can affect the child through parenting, such that parents who are unhappy in their marriage may withdraw emotionally and/or physically from their child, leading to a

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more negative parent–child relationship (e.g., Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000). Alternatively, the marital relationship can affect children more directly if they are exposed to hostile conflict, which negatively impacts children's felt security (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Thus, both proximal and distal factors are important to consider in the developing parent–child attachment relationship.

The study of more distal factors, such as socio-demographic characteristics and their impact on socio-emotional functioning during infancy, however, is scant and inconsistent (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Studies to date also have not addressed simultaneously how multiple potential systems of influence, such as socio-demographic factors, the marital relationship, and parent–infant interaction variables, are associated with infant–mother and infant–father attachment security. Thus, the current study aimed to examine how these different distal and proximal systems experienced in early infancy predict later infant attachment security with mothers and fathers. More specifically, we examined direct, mediating, and moderating processes.

1.1. Parent–infant interaction: proximal factors

1.1.1. Sensitivity

Parental sensitivity is a factor that is important to the developing infant (Zeifman, 2003), and is defined as the parent's awareness of the infant's state and the ability to make appropriate adjustments to this state (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974; Braungart-Rieker, Garwood, Powers, & Wang, 2001). Research has consistently shown that the degree to which mothers are sensitive toward their infants can influence the extent to which an infant develops a secure attachment relationship with his/her mother (Ainsworth et al., 1978; see De Wolff & Van IJzendoorn, 1997, for a meta-analysis; Nieuw & Becker, 2008). Despite consistent results between sensitivity and attachment security, however, the magnitude of the relationship is rather moderate (e.g., $d = .24$; De Wolff & Van IJzendoorn, 1997), suggesting that additional factors may be at play when examining the development of attachment security.

Moreover, studies have established an association between paternal sensitivity and infant–father attachment security (see Lucassen et al., 2011, for a meta-analysis), though the magnitude is even more modest than it is for the infant–mother attachment relationship ($d = .13$; Van IJzendoorn & De Wolff, 1997). Parent sensitivity would thus be considered a proximal factor that can influence attachment given that the infant is directly embedded in the parent–child microsystem. Results also suggest, however, that we need to consider additional factors in the prediction of attachment, perhaps particularly so for the infant–father relationship.

1.1.2. Involvement

Similar to sensitivity, parental involvement would be considered a proximal factor because it is an index of the frequency or variety of interaction experiences parents directly provide to infants. Direct involvement can come in the form of *care*, which refers to activities such as feeding or changing diapers, or in the form of *play/interaction*, which refers to activities such as talking with the infant or showing him/her how to manipulate a new toy (Lamb, Pleck, Chamov, & LeVine, 1987). Thus, the frequency of parent–child interactions allows for the potential opportunity for both the formation and the maintenance of the parent–infant attachment relationship (Friedman & Boyle, 2008).

When comparing mothers and fathers, research indicates that mothers typically spend more time with their children (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Parke, 2000), though fathers are increasingly becoming more involved (Pleck, 2010). Fathers have also been found to increase their involvement as their children get older (Gaertner, Spinrad, Eisenberg, & Greving, 2007; Lamb, 2004). Because mothers are often considered the primary caregivers, the associations between the amount of parental involvement and child outcomes have been studied within the context of the father–infant relationship and not as often in the infant–mother relationship. That is, it is often assumed that mothers are more actively involved in their children's lives, with more variability in fathers' involvement.

In addition, other than studies focusing on how infant participation in nonmaternal care (e.g., daycare) impacts the infant–mother attachment relationship, little research has examined how maternal involvement either directly impacts attachment or moderates other factors in its effect on infant attachment security. Results from these studies have been mixed; with some earlier findings indicating that nonmaternal care is associated with insecurity (e.g., Belsky & Rovine, 1988), but more recent findings indicating no direct association (e.g., Friedman & Boyle, 2008; NICHD ECCRN, 1997; Vermeer & Bakersmans-Kranenburg, 2008). Moreover, studies that have examined the amount of time mothers are available, rather than using nonmaternal care as a proxy for the inverse of involvement, have generally not found relations with infant–mother attachment (Booth, Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, & Owen, 2002; Friedman & Boyle, 2008; Huston & Rosenkrantz Aronson, 2005). It is important to note, however, that measures of maternal involvement have not examined how mothers' time was spent with infants (e.g., caregiving, interacting in play). Thus, research that assesses maternal involvement beyond the amount of time available to infants is needed to clarify its impact on infant–mother attachment.

Research examining the direct association between paternal involvement and father–infant attachment also has yielded mixed results. For example, some have found that fathers who were more involved were more likely to have secure parent–infant attachment relationships (Caldera, 2004; Cox, Owen, Henderson, & Margand, 1992). However, Brown et al. (2007) found an association between paternal involvement and father–infant attachment security, only when taking other

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