Handbook of Attachment
THEORY, RESEARCH, AND CLINICAL APPLICATIONS

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Attachment in Adolescence

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Adolescent attachment behavior appears at first glance to depart sharply from patterns of attachment behavior seen at earlier ages. Adolescents often appear to be engaged in an active, purposeful flight away from attachment relationships with parents and other parental attachment figures. Attachment bonds to parents are treated by many adolescents more like ties that restrain than like ties that anchor and secure, and a key task of adolescence is to develop autonomy so as no longer to need to rely (as much) on parents' support when making one's way through the world (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Collins, 1990; Groevert & Cooper, 1985; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986; Moore, 1987; Steinberg, 1990). Yet research is increasingly showing that adolescent autonomy is most easily established not at the expense of attachment relationships with parents, but against a backdrop of secure relationships that are likely to endure well beyond adolescence (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Allen, Hauser, Eickholt, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Fraley & Davis, 1997). Rather than being antithetical to the developmental challenge facing adolescents, the attachment system appears to play an integral role in helping adolescents meet this challenge. This is but one example of the variety of ways in which adolescent behavior toward attachment figures may seem conflicted, confused, and contradictory unless it is viewed in the context of the developmental changes of adolescence. This chapter begins with a brief consideration of a number of these changes, and then uses this developmental perspective to consider both the ways that individual differences in attachment organizations are manifested in adolescence and the ways that adolescence fits into theories explaining continuities in attachment processes across the lifespan. Ultimately, the challenges posed to attachment theory by adolescent behavior are seen as useful in clarifying and refining our understanding of the workings of the attachment system across the lifespan.

NORMATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ATTACHMENT SYSTEM IN ADOLESCENCE

From an attachment perspective, adolescence is a transitional period. At the onset of this period, the adolescent is beginning to make tremendous efforts to become less dependent on caregiving from primary attachment figures. Little more than half a decade later, in late adolescence, the possibility of becoming an attachment figure to one's own offspring has fully emerged (Ward & Carlson, 1995). Yet adolescence is not simply the span that bridges these two periods of intense involvement with attachment experiences. Rather, it is a period of profound transformations in specific emotional, cognitive, and behavioral systems, as the adolescent evolves from being a receiver of care from parents to being a potential caregiver.

Cognitive and Emotional Transformations in Adolescent Attachment Behavior

A fundamental change from infancy to adulthood is the emergence of a single overarching at-
Attachment organization, which predicts future behavior with offspring and with marital partners, from the multiple distinct patterns of attachment behavior that infants display with different caregivers (Cox, Owen, Henderson, & Margand, 1992; Fox, Kimmerly, & Schafer, 1991; O'Connor, Pan, Waters, & Posada, 1995; Steele, Steele, & Fanag, 1996; van IJzendoorn, 1992, 1995; Waters, Merrick, Albersheim, & Trehoux, 1995). This is not to say that the adolescent no longer recognizes distinctions between qualities of specific relationships with the mother, with the father, and with others; indeed, these distinctions may be clarified and sharpened during this period. Rather, it is to say that something else is also emerging—an integrated strategy for approaching attachment relationships that is highly predictive of future behavior in new attachment (and caregiving) relationships (Main & Goldwyn, in press; Steele et al., 1996; Waters et al., 1995). This in turn implies a degree of generalization and abstraction that permits the emergence of a generalized stance toward attachment from the multiple models held of different attachment relationships in infancy and childhood.

Although this development could in theory occur anywhere from middle childhood to adolescence, it appears most likely to occur during adolescence for several reasons. Adolescence brings with it the capacity for formal operational thinking, including logical and abstract reasoning abilities (Kenton, 1990); this lets the individual begin to construct, from experiences with multiple caregivers, a more overarching stance toward attachment experiences (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; Ricks, 1985). Adolescence is also characterized by dramatic increases in differentiation of self and other (Bowlby, 1972). Such differentiation allows for a more consistent view of the self as existing apart from interactions with caregivers, in contrast to the action/script-oriented view of the self in relationships that is believed to predominate in infancy and early childhood (Ricks, 1985). This in turn may allow adolescents to view themselves as distinct from their caregivers to a far greater extent than previously. Views of oneself in attachment relationships can thus become more internally based and less centered around a particular relationship.

The advent of formal operational thinking also allows an adolescent to give extended consideration to abstract and counterfactual possibilities, which in turn allow the adolescent to compare relationships with different attachment figures both to one another and to hypothetical ideals.

For example, a child may represent multiple divergent attachment experiences without considering how they relate to one another, holding views such as “My mother always helps me feel better” and “My father ignores me when I’m upset.” The adolescent, in contrast, can entertain more integrative propositions, such as “I can get help when I need it from some people, but not from everyone, so I have to be careful in deciding which people to get close to.” The potential to consider attachment relationships in the abstract brings with it the ability to recognize that parents may be deficient in some ways in meeting attachment needs (Kobak & Cole, 1994). This recognition that parents can (and perhaps should) behave differently also implies that other relationships may meet attachment needs better than current relationships with parents may. Although this process can leave an adolescent prone to becoming angrily preoccupied with or derogatorily dismissive of the “deficient” parent(s), ideally it will lead to greater openness, objectivity, and flexibility in reevaluating past attachment relationships—characteristics that mark the presence of secure attachment organization in adolescence and young adulthood (Kobak & Dusenbier, 1994; Main & Goldwyn, in press).

Transformations in the Parental Relationship

The adolescent's developing cognitive capacities do not merely affect the ability to ponder the concept of attachment in a vacuum. Rather, they (along with the myriad other physical and social changes of adolescence) are also likely to produce dramatic changes in day-to-day interactions with parents. One result of growth in the adolescent's cognitive capacities is increased sophistication in managing the “goal-oriented partnership” with each parent, in which behavior is determined not only by the adolescent's current needs and desires, but also by recognition of the need to manage certain “set goals” for the partnership (Bowlby, 1973; Kobak & Dusenbier, 1984). For example, an adolescent who wants to stay out past an agreed-on curfew considers not only the desire to stay out late, but also the overarching set goal of maintaining trust and warmth in relation to parents. Goal-oriented systems in secure dyads allow such adjustments to be made flexibly as needed. A secure adolescent who has never broken curfew before may expect only minimal disruption to the relationship from a
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The increasing goal-corrected nature of the parent-adolescent relationship provides an important context for considering one of the most important and intriguing changes of adolescence: the decreased reliance on parents as attachment figures. A critical distinction here is that this change appears primarily to reflect the adolescent's becoming less dependent on parents in a number of ways, rather than the relationship's becoming unimportant as a whole (Buhrmester, 1992; Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996; Wilks, 1986). The development of the ability to function with greater social, cognitive, and emotional autonomy vis-à-vis parents is now recognized as a critical developmental task of adolescence (Collins, 1990; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986). As noted at the outset of this chapter, however, such autonomy does not ideally develop in isolation, but in the context of a close, enduring relationship with parents (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Collins, 1990).

Research on adolescent autonomy and relatedness is beginning to link these developmental processes to an individual's attachment organization both before and after adolescence (Allen & Hauser, 1996; Becker-Stoll & Flemm-Bombik, 1997). A recent study showed that infant security was more clearly predictive of observed qualities of autonomy and relatedness in adolescent-parent interactions than it was of interview-based assessments of adolescent security (Becker-Stoll & Flemm-Bombik, 1997). This suggests that successful balancing of efforts to attain autonomy and maintain a sense of relatedness in adolescent-parent interactions related to disagreements may even potentially be considered a stage-specific manifestation of attachment security in adolescence (Allen, Kupermine, & Moore, 1997).

From this perspective, the seemingly contradictory process of learning not to get one's attachment needs met by a primary attachment fig-
without being emotionally dependent on his or her parents. In adolescence, the exploratory sys-
tem may well take on greater primacy, particular-
ly with respect to attachments to parents (though
not peers), as adolescents’ developing capacities
make them increasingly less dependent on their
parents. Without such exploration, accomplish-
ing the major tasks of social development inado-
lescence and young adulthood, such as estab-
lishing long-term romantic relationships and produc-
tive careers, may well be difficult if not
impossible. This is not different in principle from
the competing influence of the exploratory and
attachment systems on infant behavior, although
the press for autonomy in adolescence may be
more relentless and more directly in competition
with the attachment system than it is during in-
fancy (Allen, Kupersnick, & Moore, 1997; Stein-
b erg, 1990). To some extent, an adolescent’s cog-
nitive capacities come to the rescue in managing
these conflicting systems by allowing the adoles-
cent to recall that the parents remain available as
attachment figures when truly needed, even as
the adolescent attempts to develop a relationship
with the parents in which seeking of comfort is
largely avoided for long periods of time. In this
sense, the analogy to exploratory and secure-
base behavior in infancy remains apt: Adoles-
cents can explore (emotionally) the possibility of
living independently from parents, in part be-
cause they know that they can turn to parents in
cases of real need. This notion receives support
from research suggesting that the presence of
adolescent autonomy-seeking behavior tends to
be highly correlated with evidence of an underly-
ing positive relationship with parents (Allen,
Hauser, Bell, & O’Connor, 1994).

As this autonomy-seeking process unfauls, it
also appears likely to further adolescents’ capaci-
ties to reevaluate the nature of the attachment re-
lationship with parents. For with increased inde-
pendence from parents as attachment figures
may also come a certain degree of freedom from
the need to monitor and assure parents’ availabil-
ity to meet attachment needs (Kobak & Cole,
1994). Main and Goldwyn (in press) refer to this
cognitive and emotional freedom as “epistemic
space,” and suggest that it allows individuals to
evaluate their parents as attachment figures more
objectively. This epistemic space is likely to be as
important to the emerging capacity to think more
autonomously about attachment relationships as
are the developing cognitive capacities discussed
clearer. For even with fully developed cognitive
capacities, it is likely to be very difficult to attain
the critical distance needed to begin objectively
evaluating the qualities of an attachment rela-
tionship on which one feels totally dependent. In
such a dependent relationship, strongly negative
feelings about and evaluations of an attachment
figure may well be too threatening to acknowled-
gue openly, given that the expression of these
feelings may engender negative feelings and be-
haviors in return. As independence increases, so
too will the emotional distance necessary to put
developing cognitive capacities to work in re-
evaluating the nature of the attachment relation-
ship with parents. Uncomfortable as this critical
distance and objective evaluation may be to par-
ents, it seems likely to be fundamental to an
adolescent’s capacity to develop an accurate,
thoughtful response to attachment experiences.
This in turn may be crucial to resolving attach-
ment difficulties in relationships with parents in
ways that allow some adolescents to form more
secure relationships with others, such as peers, in
the future.

Transformations in Peer Relationships
By midadolescence, interactions with peers have
begun to take on many of the functions that they
will serve for the remainder of the lifespan—
providing important sources of intimacy, feed-
back about social behavior, social influence and
information, and ultimately attachment relation-
ships and lifelong partnerships (Ainsworth,
1989; Fuligni & Eccles, 1993; Gavin & Furman,
1989, 1996; Hartup, 1992). The development of
peer relationships in adolescence is characterized
by the gradual emergence of the capacity for
adult-like intimacy and supportiveness (Hartup,
1992; Jones & Dembo, 1989; Tsai, 1983). Al-
though these new components of relationships
are seen in embryonic form in childhood peer re-
lationships, they appear most clearly in an indi-
vidual’s developmental history in attachment re-
lationships with parents (Gavin & Furman, 1989,
1996; Kahn, Katz, & Gottman, 1994). This sug-
gests that the nature of developing peer attach-
ment relationships may derive as much or more
from prior attachment relationships with parents
as from prior relationships with peers. Childhood
peer relationships, although an essential aspect
of normal social development (Hartup, 1983),
are viewed as unlikely to serve much of an at-
tachment function under most conditions (Ains-
worth, 1989).

Ainsworth (1989) delineates four character-
istics that distinguish attachment relationships

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from other social relationships, and that help clarify the ways in which peer relationships do and do not serve attachment functions in adolescence. These characteristics include (1) proximity seeking; (2) secure-base behavior (freer exploration in the presence of an attachment figure); (3) safe-haven behavior (retreat to the attachment figure when facing a perceived threat); and (4) separation protest when separations are involuntary. Ainsworth's delineation makes quite clear the ways in which childhood playmates differ from attachment figures. It also makes clear the extent to which these distinctions become increasingly fuzzy when one is considering adolescent peer relationships. By late adolescence, long-term relationships can be formed in which peers (as romantic partners or as very close friends) indeed serve as attachment figures in all senses of the term (Buhrmester, 1992). What prompts this growth in the attachment qualities of peer relationships? One source is obviously the same set of cognitive, developmental, and social changes described earlier, which improve the capacity of both an adolescent and his or her peers to serve as attachment figures to one another (Youniss & Haynie, 1992). In particular, the growing push for autonomy from parents may create healthy pressure to begin to use peers as attachment figures, so that attachment needs can be met while establishing autonomy in the relationship with parents (Steinberg, 1990).

From this perspective, adolescence is not a period in which attachment needs and behaviors are relinquished; rather, it is one in which they are gradually transferred to peers. This transfer also involves a transformation from hierarchical attachment relationships (in which one primarily receives care from a caregiver) to peer attachment relationships (in which one both receives and offers care and support). Adolescents' seemingly inappropriate dependence on peers, particularly in early adolescence, may be viewed as the awkward first step toward learning to use peers as attachment figures. In this respect, phenomena such as heightened susceptibility to peer pressure are quite understandable: To the extent that peers begin replacing multiple parental functions, adolescents may reflexively tend to "obey" peer directives just as they have previously done with parental directives, and may experience an almost reflexive desire to please peers just as they have previously done with parents. The transition to use of peers as attachment figures is thus clumsy at first, and may even be dysfunctional in some ways at certain times, but it is only the necessity for adolescents to struggle with this process that encourages their capacities for adult-like attachment relationships to develop fully.

One of the endpoints of developing peer relationships in adolescence is the development of romantic relationships that may eventually become lifelong attachment relationships (Ainsworth, 1989). Romantic relationships do not solely result from developing interests in forming attachments with peers; of course, they also reflect the operation of a sexual/reproductive system that is likely to be every bit as biologically rooted and critical to species survival as the attachment system (Ainsworth, 1989; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988; see Simpson, Chapter 6, this volume). The sexual and attachment systems both push toward the establishment of new peer relationships characterized by sufficient intensity, shared interests, and strong affect to begin to take over some of the many functions of prior parent-child relationships. The sexual component of these relationships may also help advance the attachment component by providing consistent motivation for interaction, experience with intense, intimate affect, and a history of shared unique experience. It also seems likely that prior attachment experiences and current patterns of approach to attachment thoughts and feelings will in turn shape the nature of these developing romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN ADOLESCENT ATTACHMENT STRATEGIES

With some notions of the transformations in attachment cognitions, feelings, and behavior that occur during adolescence, it is now possible to consider what we know about individual differences in attachment in adolescence. Before considering the differences between secure and insecure adolescents, we must first recognize the question of just what "security" and "insecurity" actually mean for the adolescent who has developed (1) a characteristic strategy for dealing with attachment-related thoughts, feelings, and memories; (2) specific memories and representations of interactions with attachment figures; and (3) ongoing relationships with his or her attachment figures. Recent research suggesting high concordance rates between the attachment organization of individual adults and their parents (Benoit &
Parker, 1994) raises the possibility that it may even make sense to speak of secure or insecure dyads under some conditions. This chapter focuses primarily on adolescents' characteristic strategies for dealing with attachment thoughts and memories—indeed because they represent the only research with demonstrated empirical connections to the infant attachment literature, and in part because they appear to offer the best empirical basis for predicting future behavior in attachment relationships. Although a number of different and promising tools have been developed to assess attachment models, strategies, and organization in adolescence and adulthood, this chapter primarily reviews findings based on assessments made with the Adult Attachment Interview (AAC; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996; Main & Goldwyn, in press).  

Families

Although attachment processes appear to follow certain normative developmental pathways for all adolescents, for families of adolescents with secure attachment strategies, these paths appear fairly straight, smooth, and easily traversed; for families with insecure adolescents, they may be filled with twists, detours, dead ends, and difficulties. These differences are manifested in a much smoother process of balancing autonomy and attachment needs in families with secure adolescents, perhaps because these adolescents have more confidence that their relationships will remain intact and functional in spite of disagreements. For example, in the task of learning to resolve differences of opinion between parents and adolescents, teens with secure attachment strategies tend to engage in productive, problem-solving discussions that balance autonomy striving with efforts to preserve the current relationship with parents (Allen & Hauser, 1996; Becker-Stoll & Frenzir-Bombik, 1997; Kobak, Cole, Ferenz-Gillies, Fleming, & Gamble, 1993). These discussions may be heated or intense at times, but nevertheless maintain a focus on solving the disagreement at hand. In contrast, insecure teen-parent dyads are more likely to be characterized by avoidance of problem solving and lower levels of adolescent confidence in interactions, and by higher levels of disengagement, dysfunctional anger, and use of pressuring tactics that tend to undermine autonomy (Becker-Stoll & Frenzir-Bombik, 1997; Kobak et al., 1993). Disagreements that secure dyads try to resolve directly lead insecure dyads either to withdraw or to become hostile and pressuring. As noted earlier, these patterns of difficulty in handling issues of autonomy and relatedness are predictable from attachment insecurity seen both in infancy and at age 6 (Becker-Stoll & Frenzir-Bombik, 1997).

One explanation for both the avoidance and the dysfunctional anger and pressuring behavior of insecure dyads is that these behaviors are understandable responses if the dyads are interpreting adolescents' efforts to establish autonomy in disagreements as presenting a real threat to the dyadic relationship. A second explanation is that insecure adolescents (and parents) may be overwhelmed by the affect brought on by the disagreement (Kobak & Cole, 1994). Although all parents and teens occasionally become upset during disagreements, insecure teens and their parents may be more likely to have a history of difficulties in getting their upset feelings assuaged in attachment relationships. This may leave them more vulnerable to having angry, hurt feelings spiral out of control, and may lead both parties in a disagreement to move rapidly from reasoned discussions to a 'fight-or-flight' stance. A third explanation is that an insecure adolescent is easily frustrated because he or she does not expect to be heard or understood by a parent whose insecurity makes it hard to tune in accurately to the adolescent's perspectives and feelings. These three explanations are not mutually exclusive, as a relationship history that leads to adolescent insecurity would also appear likely to lead to difficulties in handling any unpleasant feelings that arise in the relationship.

The interaction patterns of families of insecure adolescents may be problematic at any point in development, but they are particularly problematic in adolescence, when autonomy strivings (and the developmental forces that drive them) almost certainly require some sensitive renegotiation of the relationship with parents (Allen, Kuperminc, & Moore, 1997; Yomtiss, 1980). This is a task for which the family of an insecure adolescent may be particularly ill suited. The moodiness, changing relationships, tension, and growing emotional and behavioral independence from parents that characterize adolescent development may all conspire to create a chronic state of activation of the attachment system, thus increasing the impact of an insecure parental relationship on the adolescent. Ironically, this occurs at the same time that the adolescent is trying to begin to reduce the centrality of the parental relationship in his or her life.
Evidence is now accumulating to suggest that distinctions among specific types of insecure attachments in families with adolescents may be understood in terms of adolescents’ balancing of efforts to attain autonomy while maintaining positive relationships in interactions. Becker-Stoitl and Fremerz-Bombik (1997) note that dismissing adolescents show the least autonomy and relatedness in interactions with parents of all attachment groups observed; this suggests that dismissing individuals’ characteristic withdrawal from engagement with attachment figures may particularly hinder the task of renegotiating the nature of parent–adolescent relationships. Reiner, Overton, Steidt, Rosenstein, and Horowitz (1996) also note that families of dismissing adolescents tend to be less responsive to their adolescents than do families of preoccupied adolescents. Allen and Hauer (1996) report that one indicator of preoccupation with attachment in young adulthood—use of passive thought processes, reflecting mental entanglement between self and caregivers—was predicted by adolescents’ overpersonalized behaviors toward fathers in arguments 10 years earlier and by adolescents’ lack of simple withdrawal from avoidance of arguments. Avoidance of problem solving and of renegotiating relationships thus appears linked to less overall security and more specifically to dismissing attachment organizations, but also to less likelihood of being insecurely preoccupied with attachment relationships. Insecure preoccupation, in contrast, appears to be best predicted from heightened and unproductive overengagement with parents in arguments that ultimately undermine an adolescent’s autonomy.

**Psychosocial Functioning**

A number of recent studies suggest the existence of substantial links between the adolescent’s attachment organization and psychosocial functioning. Two insecure attachment strategies, the preoccupied and dismissing strategies, have been implicated in problems of psychosocial functioning, although the two are associated with somewhat different patterns of problems. Adolescents’ use of preoccupied strategies has been most closely linked to internalizing problems, particularly to adolescents’ self-reports of depression (Allen, Moore, Kuperminc, & Bell, 1998; Kohak, SuUer, & Gable, 1991). Adolescent depression has been related to maternal attachment insecurity (Hormann, 1997), and these relations hold even after maternal strategies of affect regulation and maternal depression are accounted for. Adam, Sheldon-Keller, and West (1996) also report that suicidality in adolescence is related to a combination of a preoccupied and an unresolved attachment status. Together, these findings suggest a strong connection between adolescent depression and attachment insecurity (in both adolescents and their mothers), with a particular relation of depression to adolescent preoccupied attachment organization.

Externalizing problem behaviors (e.g., aggression and delinquency) have also been related to insecurity, although the attachment system appears to interact with other aspects of the adolescent relationship in producing these relationships (Allen et al., 1998). For example, maternal control of adolescent behavior—long a recognized inverse correlate of adolescent deviance (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989)—has been found to provide a buffer against deviant behavior, but only for adolescents with either secure or preoccupied attachment strategies. It thus appears that maternal control may be effective as a buffer against deviance only when adolescents are open to thinking about the maternal relationship (in either a secure or a preoccupied fashion). This finding suggests an important extension of existing theories about the importance of maternal control in adolescence, and also provides an example of the importance of beginning to integrate attachment research into existing theories of adolescent social development.

The type of insecurity to which externalizing behaviors are linked in adolescence is less clear. When examining psychiatrically hospitalized adolescents, almost all of whom were insecure, Rosenstein and Horowitz (1996) reported that preoccupied attachment strategies were associated with internalizing symptoms, whereas dismissing strategies were associated with externalizing symptoms. Preoccupied adolescents were more likely to be depressed, whereas dismissing adolescents were more likely to be substance abusing and conduct disordered. Allen et al. (1998) found that preoccupation was related to adolescent deviance, even after levels of security were accounted for, but only in the presence of additional demographic risk factors (e.g., male gender and low income). Thus, for male adolescents and for adolescents from poor families, preoccupation was associated with externalizing behavior even after accounting for levels of security. Allen and Kuperminc (1995), in contrast, found evidence that preoccupation was directly
related to externalizing behaviors when these were assessed via adolescents' self-reports. In attempting to reconcile these findings, it is important to note that adolescent problem behaviors and symptoms may serve not only as expressions of distress or of psychopathology, but also as attempts to change the nature of interactions within a parent-adolescent dyad. Externalizing problem behaviors may even serve as attachment behaviors themselves, in that they may call for help and intervention by the parent or on behalf of the adolescent (Allen et al., 1998; Kobak et al., 1993). An adolescent who has adopted preoccupied strategies for dealing with attachment-related concerns and whose attachment system is chronically hyperactivated may actually use problematic behavior as one of many extreme and ambivalent means of seeking a response from a caregiver (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994). Much as the resistant infant may call for help from a caregiver while angrily resisting the caregiver's efforts, the preoccupied adolescent may well use hostile, self-destructive, and infuriating behaviors (e.g., getting arrested for shoplifting while carrying plenty of spare cash) as a way both to engage parental attention and to express anger and resistance. This may be particularly likely to occur in adolescence, where growing perspective-taking abilities allow the adolescent to envision in advance how parents will respond to given behaviors (Kobak et al., 1993). This process may help explain why preoccupation is linked not just to internalizing symptoms (as has been frequently reported at other points in the lifespan; Cassidy & Berlin, 1994; Pianta, Egeland, & Adam, 1996; Rubin & Lollis, 1988), but also to some adolescent reports of externalizing behaviors. Even though externalizing behaviors are often associated with dismissing or avoidant attachment strategies both earlier and later in the lifespan (Allen & Hauser, 1996; Renken, Egeland, Marvinney, Mangelsdorf, & Stroufe, 1989; Rothbaum, Schneider, Pot, & Beatty, 1995), in adolescence externalizing problems may also serve a preoccupied function.

Moreover, both preoccupied and dismissing attachment strategies may lead to the development of problem behaviors by influencing the ways that adolescents process negative affect. Rosenstein and Horowitz (1996) note that the intense focus on parents that is characteristic of preoccupied strategies may lead to failure to learn to self-regulate negative affect, as well as to failure to develop the exploratory competence necessary to learn regulatory skills from other sources. This is offered as an explanation for the depression associated with adolescent preoccupation. It may also help explain externalizing behaviors, given that these behaviors are closely linked to deficits in social competence that may result from failure to explore and develop relationships apart from parents (Allen, Aber, & Leadbeater, 1990; Dodge, 1993; Leadbeater, Helfner, Allen, & Aber, 1989; Patterson et al., 1989).

Kobak and Cole (1994) suggest that different attachment strategies may predict different clusters of psychological symptoms because the strategies reflect different approaches to dealing with distress-related cues. Adolescents using dismissing strategies may take on symptoms that distract themselves and others from these cues, whereas preoccupied individuals take on symptoms that focus on distress-related cues and leave the attachment system in a more highly activated state. Kobak and Cole support this explanation with findings that eating-disordered individuals in a college population were disproportionately likely to use dismissing strategies (with the attention given to eating behaviors distracting the individuals from feelings of internal emotional distress), and that depressed individuals tended to use more preoccupied strategies. This is also in accord with the findings of Nolen-Hoeksema and colleagues that depressed individuals tend to adopt rumination strategies for coping with negative life events and accompanying negative affect—strategies that heighten and maintain their attention to distressing internal cues (Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgs, 1994; Nolen-Hoeksema, Parker, & Larson, 1994).

Peers
There are several reasons to expect close links between an adolescent's attachment organization and qualities of ongoing peer relationships. A secure attachment organization, which is characterized in adolescence and adulthood by coherence in talking (and presumably thinking) about attachment-related experiences and affect, should permit similar experiences and affect in peer relationships to be processed more accurately and coherently as well. In contrast, the defensive exclusion of information about attachment that is characteristic of insecure organizations may lead to distorted communications and negative expectations about others, both of which have been linked to problems in social functioning at various points in the lifespan (Cassidy, Kirsh,
Scoulton, & Parke, 1996; Dodge, 1993; Slaugh & Greenberg, 1990). Similarly, discomfort with attachment-related affect and experiences may also lead adolescents with dismissing attachment strategies to push away peers, particularly those who could become close friends (Kobak & Scerrey, 1988). This last hypothesis is consistent with the finding that for college students, hostility and lack of social skills as rated by close friends are linked to students’ insecure attachment organizations (Kobak & Scerrey, 1988). A related mechanism by which attachment organization may be linked to peer relationships is that insecure attachment organization co-occurs with (and serves to mask) problematic ongoing difficulties with parents, which make it difficult to move freely beyond the relationships with parents to establish successful new relationships with peers (Gavin & Furman, 1996).

Several studies have found links between attachment security and peer relationships in adolescence. Zimmermann, Scheucer-Engels, and Grossmann (1996) found that security was linked to overall friendship quality among a sample of 16-year-olds. Similarly, Allen et al. (1998) found that in a sample of academically at-risk adolescents, social acceptance by peers was positively related to adolescent attachment security. Even after the current quality of the maternal relationship was accounted for in this study, security remained a significant predictor of peer social acceptance, suggesting that attachment organization in adolescence functioned as more than just a marker of the quality of the ongoing maternal relationship. Similar research with samples of high-functioning late adolescents in college has also found consistent relationships of security to higher-quality peer relationships (Kobak & Scerrey, 1988; Treboux, Crowell, Owens, & Pan, 1994). These findings are consistent with the notion that qualities of the models of attachment held by adolescents with respect to primary attachment relationships may generalize to influence behaviors with peers, or that the emotional capacities necessary to produce secure discourse in the AAI are also useful in peer relationships (Allen et al., 1998; Cassidy et al., 1996). (For more extensive discussion of the correspondence between attachment and peer relationships, see Berlin & Cassidy, Chapter 30, and Thompson, Chapter 13, this volume).

One of the most important new facets of peer interactions to develop in adolescence is that of romantic and sexual relationships (Callari & Mikus, 1990; Treboux & Buchh-Rossnagel, 1990; Wright, Peterson, & Barnes, 1990). Here the evidence about relations to attachment organization is mixed. O’Beirne and Allen (1996) reported that adolescent security was not linked to whether a sample of at-risk 16-year-olds had begun having intercourse yet, but among those adolescents who had begun, security was linked to having first intercourse at a later as opposed to an earlier age. This suggests that insecurity may be linked to a very early age of first intercourse, but not to the occurrence of first intercourse around or after age 16. Moore (1997) reported that among sexually active adolescents, security was associated with having fewer sexual partners and with greater use of contraception. Moore also found slight evidence that after security was accounted for, use of dismissing attachment strategies was predictive of earlier age of initiation into sexual intercourse. Januszewski, Turner, Guerin, and Flack (1996) reported in a study of 21-year-olds that secure females displayed a trend toward being more likely to require some emotional commitment from partners before engaging in sex, and were also likely to have somewhat less permissive attitudes toward sexuality. These findings are consistent with the hypotheses put forward by Belsky (Chapter 7, this volume) that for evolutionary reasons, secure attachment organizations are likely to be associated with a "quality-versus-quantity" approach to sexual relationships, whereas dismissing attachment organizations are more likely to be associated with a "quantity-versus-quality" approach. Alternatively, these findings can just as easily be interpreted as similar to the findings about broader peer relationships discussed above, in which insecurity is simply linked to behavior with romantic partners that is less functional in nature (i.e., it increases the risk of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies) and more likely to be considered an externalizing problem behavior (Donovan & Jesor, 1985).

CONTINUITY IN THE MEANING AND STATUS OF ATTACHMENT FROM INFANCY THROUGH ADOLESCENCE

We have been considering many of the features of adolescent attachment strategies, while thus far avoiding a much more fundamental question: Just what is attachment in adolescence? Our working empirical answer to this question—that
attachment strategies are reflected in a type of discourse about memories of experience and affect in early attachment relationships, as assessed in the AAI—fundamentally unsatisfying for several reasons that apply as much to attachment theory in general as to adolescent attachment. First, we want to know how adolescent attachment organization is related to attachment at other points in the lifespan—particularly infancy, where our knowledge base and theories are most fully developed. Second, our current ad hoc definition provides little theoretical basis for understanding how or why such a longitudinal relationship should exist. Finally, we want to know just what the attachment system has become in adolescence. If the attachment behavioral system is no longer essential to physical survival, then just what is its role and function?

One approach to addressing these questions is to empirically assess continuities in attachment across the lifespan: Is adolescent attachment simply the stage-specific manifestation of the same attachment processes that are observed in infancy? As we are now moving into the third decade since the development of the strange situation, studies are beginning to emerge that have tracked individuals from infancy into adolescence. Thus far, the results of these studies are mixed. Waters et al. (1995) reported that late adolescent (i.e., age 21) security in the AAI was concordant with infant strange situation security at a rate of 70% (kappa = .40). When individuals who had undergone major life events that are known to alter attachment classification (e.g., death of a parent) were excluded, the concordance rate rose to 78% (kappa = .52). For those individuals with significant major life events, the concordance rate was only 44% and was nonsignificant. Main (1997) found a high degree of concordance between infant strange situation classifications and AAI classifications obtained at age 19. Hamilton (1994, 1995) also reported findings of slight continuity from infancy to adolescence. Other research has found no significant associations between infant strange situation behavior with either mothers or fathers and adolescent attachment classifications (Weinfeld, 1996; Zimmermann, Fremmer-Bombik, Spangler, & Grossmann, 1995).

Waters et al.'s (1995) findings may be most important for explaining these discrepant results, because they highlight the ways in which long-term continuities are mediated by intervening social-environmental factors. It is almost certainly important that an adolescent who has been fostered since infancy and who retains the same attachment classification over time is probably also living with parents who have retained some degree of stability in their approach to their relationship with the adolescent (Thompson, Chapter 13, this volume; van Ijzendoorn, 1996). This view receives further support and elaboration from recent findings that the degree of concordance between maternal and adolescent attachment organization is much higher for adolescents living with both biological parents than for adolescents living in other family structures (Allen, Land, Liebhana, Bell, & Jodl, 1997), although it generally appears somewhat modest overall (Zimmermann et al., 1995). In addition, mother-adolescent attachment concordance appears to be greater for older than for younger adolescents, suggesting that perhaps the stresses created by the changes of early adolescence may at least temporarily disrupt either adolescents' underlying attachment organization or the capacity to assess it (Allen, Land, et al., 1997). Somewhat in contrast, however, Rosenstein and Horowitz (1996) have reported a concordance of over 80% in maternal and adolescent attachment strategies among psychiatrically disturbed adolescents, suggesting robustness in mother-adolescent attachment concordance under some extreme conditions. Together, these findings suggest that adolescent attachment organization (and its relation to prior infant and current maternal attachment organization) may be significantly influenced both by developmental changes and by challenges in the current environment.

Of particular interest in this regard are findings from the Regensburg longitudinal study (Becker-Stein & Fremmer-Bombik, 1997) that infant attachment classifications predicted adolescent displays of autonomy and relatedness with parents, which have been found in other studies to predict attachment organization in young adulthood (Allen & Hauser, 1996). These predictions to family interaction behaviors were found even though there was no direct prediction of adolescent attachment classification from infant attachment status. These findings are in some ways similar to findings that serious psychiatric disturbance in adolescence is also predictive of attachment insecurity a decade later in young adulthood (Allen, Hauser, & Borman-Spurrel, 1996). These findings suggest that perhaps during adolescence, there are underlying structural continuities with attachment at earlier and later stages of development that are more clearly manifested in specific, discrete interac-
tions with parents and in levels of psychosocial functioning than in overall attachment organization as it is currently conceptualized. Another possibility is that the strength of the adolescent’s efforts to establish autonomy at certain points in adolescence makes it more difficult to assess actual underlying attachment organization via interviews. This latter interpretation is consistent with findings of greater resilience on the part of adolescents (as compared to adults) when participating in attachment interviews (Ward & Carlson, 1995), although it is somewhat undercut by the numerous findings discussed above suggesting the validity of the AAI in adolescence.

Evidence about continuity from adolescent attachment organization to the attachment organization of the offspring of adolescents (i.e., forward into the next generation) is not extensive, but is remarkably consistent with evidence about such continuities with adult parents and their offspring. Ward and Carlson (1995) reported concordances between the three-category attachment status of adolescent mothers, assessed with the AAI, and their offspring, assessed with the Strange situation, of 78% (kappa = .54). Thus, predictions from the attachment organization of parents to the attachments of their infant offspring do not appear to differ depending on whether the parents are adolescents or adults.

Taken together, these findings suggest substantial continuities between attachment organization in adolescence and at other points in the lifespan. Adolescent attachment strategies display very strong concordances with attachments of adolescents’ infant offspring, moderately strong concordances with parents’ attachment organization, and some evidence of weaker long-term continuities from infant attachment organization. Results from several of these studies (e.g., Allen, Land, et al., 1997; Waters et al., 1995) also suggest the presence of sources of lawful discontinuity in attachment in adolescence as a result of disruptions from both developmental and demographic factors. In some ways, these findings are reassuring in suggesting that the assessment of adolescent attachment on which we have relied does indeed tap the same construct that appears at other points in the lifespan. Yet in other ways these findings raise profound questions about just what “attachment strategies” mean in adolescence (and, by extension, in adulthood as well).

These findings raise the possibility that observed continuities between infant strange situation behavior and later adolescent attachment strategies reflect primarily continuities in parenting received, rather than continuities that result from an internal, stable working model of the self in attachment relationships (Thompson, Chapter 13, this volume; van IJzendoorn, 1996). van IJzendoorn questions whether in fact any internal stability in attachment actually does exist from infancy to adolescence, and notes evidence that observed continuities over this time frame may primarily reflect stability in parents’ attachment strategies. It is not unreasonable to assume that attachment as assessed in infants and young children is mainly an epiphenomenon, marking an adaptive response to a relatively stable pattern for handling affect on the part of the parents. Infant attachment organization may predict many future outcomes (including the nature of attachment strategies and autonomy behaviors used in adolescence) simply because it marks an important, stable aspect of parenting likely to persist over time, but in this case the essential elements of the attachment may reside more within the parents than within the infants.

A critical empirical question for the field thus becomes the following: When does attachment organization become a property of the individual and not just a reflection of qualities of major ongoing attachment relationships? To answer this question, we will need to observe individuals whose caregivers change substantially in caregiving behavior (e.g., becoming more secure following psychotherapy, or becoming insecure and unresolved following a major loss). The key issue is identification of the point in the lifespan at which an individual’s attachment organization begins to remain stable, even following changes in the care received from the primary caregiver. This process may well occur gradually over a period of years, such that adolescent attachment organization in part reflects an enduring internal state and in part reflects a response set developed to adapt to the current behaviors of the adolescent’s major attachment figures. It is also possible that attachment organization never fully exists without being to some extent dependent on the nature of specific existing attachment relationships. Mam’s pioneering work on the failure to resolve the loss of attachment figures, even in adulthood, suggests that at least some aspects of the attachment system remain subject to social and environmental influences throughout the lifespan (Main & Hesse, 1999; Main & Solomon, 1986).

To the extent that an adolescent’s attachment organization reflects a response to the ongoing
relationship with a caregiver, we need to develop a theory for the transmission of attachment organization from parent to offspring that is broad enough to encompass this process as it occurs not just in infancy, but also in adolescence. Although one could make a case that adolescent attachment organization is attuned to caregiver behavior because it serves many of the same survival functions as in infancy, this rationale is necessarily weaker in adolescence: Adolescents simply do not need their parents’ support for survival in the same way that infants do. We believe that a far better case can be made that parent-to-adolescent transmission of attachment organization results from the function of the attachment system in supporting the adolescent’s developing capacities for emotion regulation. This in turn may well have provided an evolutionary advantage, in terms of future likelihood of reproduction, by increasing the adolescent’s social skills or by tuning the adolescent’s strategies to his or her social environment (Beisky, Chapter 7, this volume).

EMOTION-REGULATING FUNCTIONS OF ADOLESCENT ATTACHMENT ORGANIZATION

Parents frequently deal with their adolescents’ states of emotional upheaval (Larson et al., 1994), and although an adolescent’s actual survival is rarely threatened, emotional dysregulation frequently appears in the form of emotional “crises” in which the adolescent feels he or she simply cannot go on or cope with a situation judged to be intolerable. A central function of the adolescent’s attachment relationship with parents may be to provide an emotional secure base from which the adolescent can explore the wide range of emotional states that arise when he or she is learning to live as a relatively autonomous adult. Developing the capacity to regulate affect without distortions, even in regard to highly charged issues (e.g., “Where and with whom will I live next year?”), may well enhance the ability to form and sustain future relationships and ultimately to nurture one’s own offspring. From this perspective, the last major caregiving task of parents becomes supporting their adolescent’s capacity to cope with the affect engendered in learning to live independently of parental care-giving.

It is fairly easy to see ways in which adolescents’ discourse in the AAIs may come to match parental emotion-regulating strategies. One of the most prominent features of the classification system used to code the AAIs is its implicit assessment of the degree of coherence, clarity, and organization brought to bear in discussing highly affectively charged situations (Cassidy, 1994; Main & Goldwyn, in press). The dismissing adolescent or adult is characterized by a tendency to avoid discussion or consideration of a range of strong affects, such as fear, anger, disappointment, hurt, and loneliness; he or she may thus idealize past relationships, minimize the importance of past difficulties, or present the self as relatively invulnerable. One can readily imagine that a dismissing parent may treat his or her adolescent’s difficulties with such feelings in a similar fashion, and that the adolescent may thus learn that handling his or her own feelings of distress in this fashion is the most adaptive available strategy, given the parent’s inability to respond in a supportive way. Similar patterns can easily be envisioned with respect to use of preoccupied attachment strategies: An adolescent may learn, for example, that becoming deeply involved in anger regarding close relationships is the least painful, most self-protective way to cope with a parent who consistently utilizes this approach when dealing with the adolescent.

A focus on the emotion-regulating functions of attachment organization may help clarify one of the thornier issues in the assessment of attachment organization beginning in adolescence: In contrast to the emphasis in infant attachment theory on the content of the infant’s internal working models of the self in relation to attachment figures, the actual classification of adolescent (and adult) interviews relies virtually not at all on assessment of the content of these internal working models. Rather, the content is duly noted, but the critical distinction with respect to overall assessments of security/autonomy in adolescent and adult attachment revolve around the ways in which the adolescent or adult processes emotion-charged memories of attachment experiences. What is noteworthy, for example, about the dismissing adolescent’s recounting of past experiences with parents is not necessarily the specific content of what is recalled. Such recounts may range from glowing but vague descriptions of parenting received to detailed, negative descriptions that lack any indication of the emotional impact they had on the interviewee. What is consistent, however, is that all discourse steers the individual away from in-depth consideration of possible negative feelings (i.e., loss,
missing, regret) surrounding attachment figures. Although this pattern of emotion regulation is first easily assessed in adolescence via the AAI, infant strange situation behavior can be similarly interpreted in terms of the infant’s regulation of affect aroused by attachment needs. Avoidance of parents on reunion may reflect efforts to minimize the affectively arousing nature of such reunions, as well as the affect experienced during the separation. Similarly, ambivalence or resistance may well reflect an overwhelmed, arousal-enhancing style of coping with strong affect. In infancy, patterns of emotion regulation with a caregiver tend to correlate with characteristics of the infant’s internal working model of self in relationship to that caregiver (Cassidy, 1994; Thompson, Flood, & Landequist, 1995), and there may be relatively little distinction between the two with respect to attachment organization. In adolescence, the processes used for handling strong emotion may well diverge from the content of any given internal model, and the individual’s coherence, openness, and flexibility in describing affectively charged attachment memories are used to distinguish secure from insecure adolescent (and adult) attachment organization (Main & Goldwyn, in press).

A focus on emotion-regulating aspects of adolescent attachment organization also offers a clear prediction about the timing and conditions under which attachment organization will become a stable internal property of the developing individual, rather than a reflection of the current relationship with a primary caregiver. If attachment organization reflects primarily a strategy for handling intense affect, then it is likely to come to reside within the individual, to the extent that the individual has developed independent capacities for handling such affect without reliance on his or her primary caregiver. As long as the caregiver must be relied on extensively in regulating affect, then it is adaptive for the strategy used by the adolescent in affect regulation to match that of his or her caregiver. It makes little sense to try to ignore attachment-related cues, for example, when one is interacting with a primary caregiver who is preoccupied with attachment. It is only when one no longer relies as heavily on a caregiver to regulate affect that one can develop an independent, potentially divergent approach to affect regulation. This prediction in turn brings us back to adolescence as the stage in life when this transformation appears most likely to occur, given the extent to which adolescence is characterized by the developing capacity to regulate affect and behavior independently of reliance on a primary caregiver (Kobak & Cole, 1994).

Understanding when attachment strategies take on a degree of internal stability is critical to understanding when those strategies are truly "passed on" from generation to generation. Prior to this stabilization, continuity between parent and offspring attachments may exist, but it may merely reflect offspring reaction to current interactions with the parent. In essence, such continuity is little more than a mirroring of parenting behavior. After this internalization process occurs, in contrast, an attachment strategy has truly been transmitted to the next generation and will display continuity into the future. Knowing when this transition takes place is essential to thinking about when and how to intervene to alter attachment strategies in individuals (should one focus on parents, on an adolescent, or on both, for example?). It is also essential to understanding just what attachment means in adolescence.

CONCLUSIONS

In some ways we know a great deal about attachment in adolescence, yet in other respects we know disconcertingly little. As at other stages of development, attachment strategies of adolescents are related to numerous aspects of psychosocial functioning. These strategies are also lawfully related to parents’ attachment strategies, to the attachment strategies of the infant offspring of adolescent parents, and (to a lesser extent) to the prior attachment strategies of adolescents observed as far back as infancy. Yet attempts to assess attachment in adolescence inevitably must confront the questions of what attachment becomes and what function it serves during this stage of the lifespan. These questions are critical to understanding attachment in adolescence, but they also have important implications for our efforts to define attachment across the lifespan in a way that both conforms to our knowledge regarding infancy and yet is flexible enough to account for the changes in the nature of the attachment system in adolescence and beyond.

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PART IV ATTACHMENT IN ADOLESCENCE AND ADULTHOOD

NOTES

1. The AAI focuses primarily on state of mind with respect to attachment [to parents] as assessed through coded discourse. It places primary emphasis on the coherence of discourse about childhood relationships with parents. This chapter focuses on research utilizing this measure, because thus far it is the only measure that has demonstrated an empirical connection to the attachment construct as assessed in infancy (as evidenced by small continuities that have sometimes been observed from attachment organization in infancy to that in adulthood assessed with the AAI, and much more robust predictions from the AAI to the capacity to establish a secure attachment relationship with one's infant offspring).

There are also studies of adolescent attachment based on several different self-report instruments. For example, the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) has been used in several studies (e.g., Papini & Roggman, 1992; Papini, Roggman, & Anderson, 1991; Paterson, Fryer, & Field, 1995; Schultheis & Blustein, 1994a, 1994b) with subjects as young as 12 years of age to assess perceived quality (i.e., security) of relationships with mothers, fathers, and peers. Self-report measures of romantic attachment (e.g., Bartholowicz & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1990) have been used in scores of studies involving 18- and 19-year-old college students (see Feeney, Chapter 17, this volume, for a review of literature on romantic attachment). Recently this kind of measure was used in a large representative-sampling study of black and white adolescents (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998). The associations and differences between the AAI and self-report attachment measures are discussed in Chapter 23 of the present volume by Crowell, Fraley, and Shaver.

REFERENCES


CHAPTER 15. Attachment in Adolescence


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