Maternal Attachment Organization as a Predictor of Mother-Adolescent Interactions and Adolescent Attachment Organization

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Paper presented at the Meeting of the Society for Research on Child Development, April 1997, Washington, D.C. Correspondence should be addressed to Joseph P. Allen, Department of Psychology, 102 Gilmer Hall, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, 22903 (allen@virginia.edu).

This research was supported by grants from the William T. Grant Foundation and the Spencer Foundation to Joseph P. Allen.
I. (Slide #1) I'd like to start by acknowledging my co-authors on this paper, Kathy Bell, Debbie Land, Sarah Liebman, and Katie Jodl, and also by noting that data I'll be presenting are drawn from a large, ongoing, project in Charlottesville which is built upon the efforts of a large number of current and former graduate students as you can see listed. (Slide #2)

II. (Slide #3) This paper will examine continuities between attachment security in mothers and in their adolescent offspring, and the factors that lead to continuity OR to discontinuity in attachment security from one generation to the next.

A. Pioneering work by Mary Main, and follow-up research by a number of other researchers has demonstrated that patterns of attachment organization display sometimes remarkable degrees of continuity across generations...from parent to infant, and, in one study, from grandparent to parent to infant.

B. These continuities are important because a secure attachment organization has been found to be a remarkably pervasive and powerful correlate of social functioning across the lifespan, linked to outcomes ranging from depression, to externalizing behaviors, functioning in marital relationships, and functioning with peers, not to mention parenting behavior.

C. YET, given the potential importance of these continuities, we know very little about them in many ways.

D. For example, one of our biggest unanswered questions is: How, when, and under what conditions is attachment organization transmitted from one generation to the next.

E. Van IJzendoorn and Thompson have both noted that the high correlations between maternal and infant security do not necessarily mean that attachment is transmitted DURING INFANCY. It could be that the correlation simply reflects infant's response to the parents' behavior.

F. YET, WE HAVE LITTLE DATA ON ATTACHMENT CONTINUITIES OUTSIDE OF CHILDHOOD with which to consider this issue.

G. ADOLESCENCE offers a particularly interesting opportunity
1. Adolescents have a growing capacity to reevaluate and critique their parents as attachment figures and
2. They are often actively trying to move beyond reliance upon their parents as attachment figures; and

H. This Leads us to several major questions, which are the focus of this paper:
1. (Slide #4) First, Does continuity even exist in attachment security between adolescents and their mothers?
2. What are the conditions under which continuities are least and greatest?
3. What family characteristics are associated with different adolescent (and maternal) attachment strategies?
4. Of those associated family characteristics, do any appear to mediate continuities between maternal and adolescent attachment organization?

III. Method & Sample

A. (Slide #5) To approach this question, we sought to obtain a sample of adolescents who were moderately at-risk. That is, neither functioning so well nor so poorly that minor variations in attachment organization would be unlikely to matter.
B. We recruited adolescents through public schools based upon presence of any single, low-level risk factor such as failing one class for one marking period, multiple absences, suspensions and history of grade retention. In essence, this sampling technique captures the "riskier half" of a high school class using available academic/behavioral criteria.

C. (Slide #6) As you can see on this slide, the sample includes individuals with a range of socioeconomic conditions, each of which we considered as possible moderators of continuities we observe.

D. (Slide #7) We assessed attachment representations in adolescents and mothers, using the Berkeley Adult Attachment Interview.

E. These interviews sample individuals’ descriptions of their past attachment relationships, but the coding system does not simply code the content of these descriptions, but rather focuses upon the coherence in the adolescent and adult’s ways of handling affect and memories related to their attachment experiences.

F. AAI’s were blindly coded w/ respect to the rest of the data in the study.

G. Interviews were coded with Roger Kobak’s Adult Attachment Q-sort, using raters who had also received training on Mary Main’s classification system. Preliminary data suggest that codes from the two systems are highly correlated.

H. The Adolescent attachment codes in this study have been previously found to relate to a variety of theoretically predicted areas of adolescent functioning as reported by the adolescents, their peers and their parents.

I. We also OBSERVED FAMILY INTERACTION BEHAVIORS, but I’ll get to that in a bit.

IV. RESULTS

A. (Slide #8) Turning now to our first research question we wanted to know, given the many forces influencing adolescent social and emotional development, just what was the degree of continuity between maternal and teen attachment security.

B. (Slide #9) As we see on the next slide, mother’s security was modestly correlated with teens’ security at r=.28* (N=74)

1. So, while continuity exists, clearly there are important sources of discontinuity that we’re going to want to try to account for.

2. (Slide #10) This leads naturally to our next question, which is what factors appear to influence whether or not continuities were transmitted from mothers to adolescents.

C. One factor that we considered was the family structure in which adolescents were living. Based on related work by Everett Waters and colleagues, we hypothesized that mother-adolescent continuities might well be greatest in the absence of ongoing emotional challenges to the adolescent’s attachment system. One such ongoing challenge might well be living apart from one’s biological father. Thus, we expected that families headed by 2 biological parents of the adolescent might well display more mother-adolescent continuity than other family structures.

D. (Slide #11) So, we divided our data to look at security for our 2-biological parent families vs. other family structures. We found the correlations you see on the slide that clearly support our hypothesis:

1. Mother-adolescent continuity is greatest when it isn’t disrupted by
what we’re thinking of as the emotional noise of the adolescent’s needing to deal with the absence of a parent, extended separations and possible conflicts with and between a resident and an absent parent.

E. We can further examine this idea that major emotional struggles with attachment figures may disrupt continuities by looking at the moderating effects of the AGE as a moderator. Our hypothesis here is that in early to mid-adolescence (i.e. prior to age 16) is when the most intense renegotiation of the parent-adolescent relationship occurs. Conversely, as adolescents age, we expect them to gradually settle in to attachment organizations that DO reflect the enduring effects of maternal caregiving, rather than of intervening events.

F. (Slide #12) Looking separately at intergenerational continuities for those adolescents older than 16 vs. younger than 16 we find support for this notion:
1. younger than 16: \( r = .14 \) (N= 33)
2. 16 and older: \( r = .37^* \) (N= 41)
3. ***We should note that we do NOT think the AAI was less valid with younger adolescents, in part because we’ve found it to predict to other markers of functioning (such as peers’ reports of adolescent social competence) equally well for younger and older adolescents.

G. (Slide #13) Finally, the next slide shows the additive nature of these effects, albeit with v. small sample sizes.
1. younger adolescents not living with both biological parents: \( r= -.10 \) (N= 19)
2. younger adolescents living with both biological parents \( r = .33 \) (N= 14)
3. older adolescents not living with both biological parents \( r= .30 \) (N= 25)
4. older adolescents living with both biological parents \( r= .46^+ \) (N= 16)

H. The statistical interactions of age and family structure do appear significant at the trend level, which Cohen suggests is reasonable given the difficulty of detecting interactions.

I. (Slide #14) What do we make of this:
1. Although overall, we find moderate continuity between mother and adolescent, our real conclusion is that The question is not: how much continuity is there across generations? BUT Rather: under what conditions is continuity most likely to be maintained and displayed?
2. Our data suggest that continuity from mother to adolescent exists, but is fairly easily disrupted by developmental and environmental factors that may create attachment-related stresses upon the adolescent.

V. (Slide #15) We now turn to our final set of questions: Can we begin to identify those family behaviors that are most likely to mediate the continuities we do observe?
A. Here, we look at observed family interactions and at the processes by which families handle the adolescents’ growing needs for autonomy, and efforts to attain such autonomy while still maintaining positive relationships with parents: which we see as a critical stage-salient task of adolescence. (Slide #16)
B. Procedure: We measure autonomy and relatedness using a revealed differences task, in which parents and adolescents take 10 minutes to discuss what they have separately identified as one of their greatest areas of disagreement.

1. We work with 3 categories of family interaction variables as seen on the next slide.
   a. (Slide #17) Overall promotion/display of combined autonomy and relatedness reflects a focus upon the reasons underlying disagreements in a way that allows autonomy to be expressed while still preserving relationships.
   b. Enmeshing or autonomy-undermining behavior in which family members overpersonalize disagreements or turn them into contests of personalities.
   c. Hostile or relatedness-undermining behavior in which family members are rude, hostile, condescending or ignoring of other members’ statements.

2. **We did not find interactions with age or family status for these variables, and so we present the following data for the sample as a whole.**

C. As the next slide shows, (Slide #18) we considered behaviors as being most likely to mediate intergenerational continuities if they were: 1) simultaneously associated with both mother’s AND adolescents’ attachment organization, 2) were specific to the maternal-adolescent dyad, and 3) statistically accounted for at least some of the observed continuity between mother and adolescent attachment security.

D. Looking first at adolescents’ behaviors toward their mothers THE LEFT HAND COLUMN OF NUMBERS ON THE SLIDE:
   a. (Slide #19) We see a pattern in which the ability to display autonomy and relatedness with mothers was clearly related to adolescent attachment security.
   b. However, what we also see is that these behaviors are almost as highly related to maternal security.
   c. This second finding makes the picture far more interesting from a causal perspective, for other research gives us reason to believe that maternal security is fairly stable over relatively long periods of time, and thus more likely to be a cause than an effect of adolescent’s behavior.
   d. What it suggests is that secure mothers may be able to setup interactions with their adolescents in which the adolescent’s can establish autonomy while enjoying and working collaboratively to maintain the secure base of their relationship with their mothers.
   e. We also find an effect with enmeshing behaviors, which suggests that when you are raised by a secure mother, the process of establishing autonomy and independence may be particularly challenging--precisely because your mother has been so good at meeting your needs sensitively to that point.
1. **(Slide #20)** Looking at the parallel behaviors of mothers toward their adolescents we see that maternal behavior promoting autonomy and relatedness with their adolescent is related to adolescent security, although not to maternal security. Now this could just be a sample size/power issue.

2. BUT another way of viewing these data, is to say that we can see the effects of maternal security as they are REFLECTED in the adolescent’s behaviors better than we can see them in the mother’s own behaviors. In other words, secure Mothers are most distinguishable for their capacity to evoke adaptive behaviors on the part of their adolescents.

   a. If at first this idea seems somewhat strange, it may help to recognize that we are in a similar situation in infancy, where we can identify infant strange situation behaviors linked to mothers’ security more easily than we can identify mothers’ behaviors linked to her security.

3. This approach suggests that perhaps what we observe in adolescent behavior can be viewed as a reflection of parental attachment organization or as being tuned to that parents’ attachment organization.

VI. **NOW A SKEPTIC MIGHT SAY, ?NO, TEENS? BEHAVIORS AREN’T TUNED? TO MOTHER?’S ATTACHMENT ORGANIZATION…**

   A. RATHER, all of these correlations could be in some sense spurious in that they may just reflect a global, inherited, perhaps temperamental factor that influences the adolescent’s behavior globally and also is linked to parental attachment security.

   B. This is a legitimate issue, but if this were the case, then we’d expect, for example, that if we observed adolescent’s with their fathers, we’d be just as likely to get correlations from these behaviors to maternal attachment security…b/c its a global adolescent trait that is driving the findings.

   C. **(Slide #21)** However, the next slide shows results looking at teens’ separate interactions with fathers, for those families where fathers participated. These results suggest that adolescent’s behaviors toward fathers are clearly related to adolescent attachment security, BUT teens’ interactions with fathers ARE NOT related to MATERNAL ATTACHMENT SECURITY…

   D. Now this is very specific evidence that the behaviors of the adolescent REFLECT, or are TUNED to the security of the SPECIFIC parent with whom they are interacting, which we see as just one more piece of evidence that this process of establishing autonomy while maintaining relationships is part of a mediating link in the transmission of attachment security from one parent to one adolescent.

   E. **(Slide #22)** Looking at FATHER’s behaviors toward the adolescent, we see a contribution similar to what mothers’ behaviors provide. We don’t have father AAI data coded yet, but this certainly gives us reason to think this will be a worthwhile endeavor.

VII. **TURNING TO OUR FINAL SET OF ANALYSES,** We began to consider multiple predictors of adolescent attachment security in combination with each other. **(Slide #23)**
The one consistent finding we obtained was for the combination of mothers' security and teens' behaviors displaying autonomy and relatedness in interactions with mothers as both joint and independent contributors to the prediction of adolescent attachment security.

A. What we see on this slide is that after accounting for current maternal attachment security, adolescents' behavior toward mothers both absorbs some of the variance accounted for by maternal security and also accounts for additional variance as well.
   1. The result is a Multiple R of .41 for predictions of adolescent attachment security and our final, statistical, piece of evidence that the adolescent's ability to establish autonomy and maintain a sense of relatedness in interactions with mother serves to mediate the link between maternal and adolescent attachment security.

B. (Slide #24) Going back to the criteria we outlined earlier for assessing the likelihood we've found a mediating set of behaviors in our data, we see that adolescents' success in establishing autonomy and maintaining relationships with parents IS related to BOTH maternal and adolescent security, SHOWS DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY, in that this dual relationship to mother and teen security is specific to adolescent's behaviors with mother, rather than all adolescent behaviors, AND STATISTICALLY acts to account for some of the relation between maternal and adolescent attachment security.

C. (Slide #25) Putting all of this together with our earlier findings, we get a tentative model that looks something like the following. We DO see evidence of continuities between mothers and adolescents, but continuities that depend upon: contextual factors, such as adolescent's age and family structure; qualities of ongoing interactions in families; and probably interactions with fathers as well.

VIII. Clearly, there are a number of limitations to these data.
   A. This is a somewhat unusual sample.
   B. These are cross-sectional data.
   C. And, we're not accounting for huge amounts of the variance in our outcomes solely with attachment measures.

IX. (Slide #26) In summary, we have made progress in several respects in identifying the nature of intergenerational continuities in attachment organization as these exist in adolescence. We find:
   A. First, that such continuities do exist, but that they are BOTH mediated and moderated.
   B. Second, the moderating effects of age and family structure suggest just how sensitive the transmission of attachment security from parent to adolescent may be to disruption by ongoing environmental and developmental factors.
   C. Third, that parental success in helping the adolescent establish autonomy while maintaining connections with parents may be one of the critical mediating links that allows security to be transmitted from parent to adolescent.
   D. And finally, our data just begin to touch on father's roles here, but in a way that suggests that if we really want to understand attachment continuities, we're going to need to consider ALL of the relevant caregivers, not just mothers.