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Research Article

Examining how Different Attachment Styles Influence Social and Emotional Adjustment During Adolescence.

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Abstract

This paper discusses the influence of various attachment styles on social and emotional adaptation in adolescence. It discusses five related themes based on systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and empirical studies: quality of peer relationships, emotion regulation, internalising problems, developmental reorganisation of attachment in relation to the context of relationships, and gender and cultural moderating roles. The results are consistent, with secure attachment being associated with enhanced peer competence, more adaptive emotion regulation, and less susceptibility to anxiety and depression. Unsecure attachment, especially anxious attachment, is linked to increased emotional distress, interpersonal instability and increased vulnerability to internalising problems. The paper argues that emotion regulation is the core process by which attachment can affect social and emotional outcomes during adolescence and that attachment effects are determined by personal, interpersonal and situational factors instead of acting universally.

Introduction

Attachment theory, first developed by John Bowlby, provides a theory of emotional and social functioning in the lifespan that can be predicted by the early relationships with caregivers (Bretherton, 1992). Bowlby believed that infants have a biological motivation to be near familiar caregivers during distressful situations since this will foster survival. In the process of repeated interactions, children develop internal working models, mental representations of experience of the self, others, and relationships that help them form expectations about the availability of support, the safety of expression of feelings and how closeness should be negotiated (Flaherty and Sadler, 2011). These models do not just act as cognitive beliefs but rather as organising templates that influence attention, interpretation of interpersonal cues and emotion regulation during development (Flaherty and Sadler, 2011).

Mary Ainsworth operationalised the theoretical foundations of Bowlby, with her Strange Situation Procedure offering a systematic way of categorising infant-caregiver attachment patterns. The procedure subjects infants to a series of separations and reunions with a caregiver as well as the presence of an unfamiliar adult, to monitor the way infants explore with the aid of a secure base of the caregiver and a haven during periods of stress (Benoit, 2004). According to infant behaviour during reunion episodes, Ainsworth

described three organised attachment patterns: secure attachment where the infant may experience distress during separation but is comforted effectively on returning to exploration; insecure-avoidant attachment where the infant appears to experience indifference and avoidance on re-uniting; and insecure-resistant or ambivalent attachment where the infant experiences excessive distress and ambivalent response (infant seeks closeness and avoids comfort at the Main and Solomon subsequently included a fourth type, disorganised or disoriented attachment, to explain incongruent and disrupted behavioural strategies that arise when the caregiver is both comforting and frightening at the same time (Duschinsky, 2015). Combined, these categories formed a paradigm of research on which the influence of early attachment on socioemotional development later should be analysed.

Adolescence is a developmental stage that has a significant implication on attachment since the relational terrain is altered significantly (Allen and Miga, 2010). The role of peer relationships is intensified; identity development imposes new pressure on the sense of self the adolescent has, and dealing with rejection and social assessment turns into a long-term issue (Allen and Miga, 2010). Though adolescents may not show explicit attachment behaviour towards their parents as compared to younger children, the pressure of emotion regulation becomes rife during the adolescent years, and regulation is the main mechanism through which attachment is still manifested (Allen and Miga, 2010). At the same time, peers become the key sources of intimacy and social support, and the quality of these relationships is directly linked to adolescent adjustment (Delgado et al., 2022; Oldfield et al., 2016).

The modern attachment models distinguish two prototypical insecure attachment-related regulatory strategies which are particularly applicable in adolescent peer contexts. Anxious attachment is related to hyperactivating strategies, whereby an individual is more vigilant to rejection and more distressed (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2016). Avoidant attachment is linked to deactivating strategies, which entail the suppression of emotions and avoidance of attachment-related cues (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2016). Since adolescent peer contexts are full of ambiguity in interpersonal relationships such as the change in group relationships and delayed or uncertain social feedback, such regulatory inclinations can have a significant impact on how adolescents perceive social situations, cope with distress, and maintain relationships in the long term (Allen and Miga, 2010; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2016). The evidence reviewed and synthesised in this paper has been based on five interrelated themes: quality of peer relationships and peer-group adjustment, emotion regulation as a central process, internalising problems such as anxiety and depression, the process of developmental reorganisation of attachment between parental and peer and romantic relational contexts, and the moderating role of gender and culture. These themes combine to present an evidence-based, coherent explanation of the role of various attachment styles in influencing social and emotional outcomes in adolescence.

Peer Relationship Quality and Peer-Group Adjustment

One of the fundamental differences in the adolescent peer literature is the existence of peer relationships and the quality of peer relationships. Peer relationship quality, as a systematic review by Delgado revealed, has such dimensions as trust, communication, intimacy, emotional support, and adaptive conflict management, and it is such qualitative aspects, not just peer exposure, that are most closely linked to the social adjustment of adolescents (Delgado et al., 2022; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2016).

This difference is theoretically significant, as it changes the question of whether an adolescent has peers to whether such relationships offer the type of secure, supportive foundation that allows healthy development. Delgado et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review, which is guided by PRISMA, and discovered that secure parental attachment was related to higher trust, communication, closeness, and support in peer relationships in adolescence. These results suggest that attachment is not only the determinant of the presence of peer relationships but also the culture of relationships in them. Groh et al. (2014) gave quantitative support to this relationship by conducting a meta-analysis of 80 independent samples (4,441 participants) and discovered that there was a significant correlation between attachment security and peer competence ($d = 0.39$). Importantly, this correlation did not decrease with age during adolescence, which implies that the variations in attachment-related peer competence are not limited to early childhood but have a significant value during the adolescent years.

These results directly question the notion that attachment theory applies to infancy and early childhood. The trend that can be observed most directly throughout the literature is that attachment is correlated with relational competence and not the pure amount of being socially connected. Relational competence is being responsive to others, having productive support, and the ability to restore relationships following conflict (Delgado et al., 2022; Allen and Miga, 2010). Allen and Miga (2010) put this in the context of the ability of the adolescent to deal with interpersonal issues without compromising on closeness, which is exactly the regulatory requirement that distinguishes between high-quality peer relationships and superficial social contact. On the peer-group functioning level, peer-reported and sociometric measures provide a valuable methodological dimension of research. In cases where attachment and adjustment are both self-reported, shared-method variance may overstate observed correlations. The research employing peer-reported acceptance or victimisation data and attachment measures is sensitive to this issue and enhances the conclusions on the role of attachment in the construction of social positioning in peer groups (Dykas et al., 2008).

A meta-analysis by Ward et al. (2018) has been able to connect attachment insecurity to peer victimisation, which is a high-stakes outcome with a social threat and relational exclusion. This fact aligns with theoretical explanations where appraisal of threats associated with attachment and regulatory strategies affect the way adolescents are viewed and treated by their peer groups. Attachment and peer adjustment is also a two-way relationship. Quality friendships may be used to compensate the impact of insecure parental attachment on psychosocial functioning (Rubin et al., 2004). This implies that peer relationships do not just result in attachment, but have the ability to alter attachment-related relational expectations in the long term (Dykas et al., 2008; Spruit et al., 2020).

The systems-level account, where parental attachment and quality of peer relationships interact and mutually affect one another, provides a better description of the development of adolescents than a simple transmission model where the impact of attachment runs in one way only, parents to peers. Overall, attachment styles are reliably and significantly related to social adjustment in adolescents in terms of the quality of peer relationships and peer competence. These correlations can be considered probabilistic and transactional, which do not follow predetermined and definite routes but are built based on relations (Delgado et al., 2022; Groh et al., 2014; Rubin et al., 2004; Dykas et al., 2008).

Emotion Regulation

A key role in developmental explanations of the effects of attachment on the adjustment of adolescents is played by emotion regulation. Allen and Miga (2010) suggest that adolescence is a developmental change whereby open proximity seeking of parents is replaced by self-regulation of distress, where regulation becomes the stage where attachment is most clearly manifested during this stage. This framing is critical to comprehending why attachment still remains a predictor of a broad spectrum of adjustment outcomes as adolescents shift their social energy to their peers and start to have a more independent relation to their families. The most systematic theoretical explanation of the translation of attachment orientations into regulatory behaviour is by Mikulincer and Shaver (2019).

Secure attachment is linked with flexible and context-sensitive emotion control, enabling adolescents to recognise distress, seek support where relevant, and resume normal functioning without undue preoccupation and avoidance. The two opposite regulatory profiles are the result of insecure attachment. The hyperactivating strategies that relate to anxious attachment include continuous checking on threats to attachment security, over-expressing distress, and inability to uninvolve in attachment-related concerns. This is reflected in adolescent peer situations, where there is increased sensitivity to perceived rejection, inability to tolerate social ambiguity, and interpersonal volatility that can destabilise peer relationships. Deactivating strategies, which are related to avoidant attachment, entail the inhibition of emotional reactions and avoidance of attachment-related stimuli.

Though this tactic minimises immediate distress, it inhibits self-disclosure and limits the ability of the adolescent to use peer support, thereby limiting the richness and intensity of intimate relationships. These control measures are not just theoretically described. In a meta-analysis of cognitive-emotional mediators of the insecure attachment-depression relationship, Cortes-Garcia et al. (2020) discovered that the mediators explain significant proportions of the relationship, which is consistent with a process-level explanation. Attachment is not merely associated with poor outcomes, but it functions via recognisable regulatory and cognitive mechanisms. Such a difference is important to a publishable synthesis since it changes the description to one of mechanism rather than association, providing a description of how and why attachment predicts adjustment.

Emotion regulation has a broader scope in both social and emotional realms. Regulatory ability is needed in constructive communication, tolerance of interpersonal ambiguity, and the ability to repair relationships once conflict has taken place (Delgado et al., 2022). In this view, regulation is not an independent issue to peer relationship quality but the process, which enables relational competence. It is also the reason why

the identical literature on regulation is directly related to internalising outcomes: the same pattern of cognitive appraisal and emotional disposition that causes peer relationships to be challenging is the one that produces vulnerability to anxiety and depression.

This cross-domain role of regulation was empirically supported by Laible (2007), who showed that secure attachment to parents as well as peers is linked to emotional competence and prosocial behaviour in late adolescence. Young people who had secure attachment histories displayed more empathy, more reliable prosocial responding and more stable social behaviour patterns, which indicated that attachment influences peer outcomes in part by developing the regulatory and interpersonal competencies which enable positive relational interaction. Sheinbaum et al. (2015) experience-sampling studies provide an ecological validity to this account. Their work demonstrated that attachment styles are consistently connected to moment-to-moment affect, cognitive appraisal of social situations, and the daily functioning of social life. Despite the sample being composed of young adults, the mechanisms are directly applicable to adolescence, which is also defined by large amounts of social interaction, frequent social evaluation, and recurring regulatory demands both in the peer, school, and family settings.

This work significantly contextualises attachment as a dynamic process that occurs in everyday life as opposed to a fixed trait that results in fixed outcomes. When combined, the evidence implies a consistent mechanistic explanation: attachment styles produce typical regulatory strategies, which, in turn, influence the relational behaviour in the moment-to-moment, and the pattern of relational behaviour over time leads to the quality and stability of peer bonds and the susceptibility to internalising distress. This causal chain is what makes the effects of attachment so extensive across the social and emotional domains as well as the differences in outcomes, as the same underlying insecurity can result in very different adjustment problems when the dominant strategy is hyperactivating or deactivating (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2016; Allen and Miga, 2010).

Developmental Reorganisation: From Parental to Peer and Romantic Attachment

Among the most theoretically important contributions of adolescent attachment research is the acknowledgement that adolescence is not merely an extension of previous attachment processes but that it is a process of active reorganisation of relational salience. The role of parents does not decrease during the adolescent stage, but peers and then romantic partners become the key sources of intimacy, support, and identity confirmation (Allen and Miga, 2010; Delgado and others, 2022). This reorganisation is critical to understanding why attachment is predictive of adjustment outcomes during adolescence despite the fact that the surface characteristics of attachment behaviour vary significantly during adolescence, relative to the situation during infancy and early childhood. According to Allen and Miga (2010), emotion regulation is the key to explaining this continuity. Although the rate of proximity-seeking of parents declines with age, the regulatory mechanisms established during early attachment experiences persist in influencing the way adolescents cope with distress, interact with peers, and cope with the social challenges of adolescent life. Parental attachment thus does not wear its relevance through the generation of visible attachment behaviour but rather through the affordance of the regulatory background in which peer functioning is constituted. The systematic review by Delgado et al. (2022) empirically supported this continuity as it revealed that parental attachment quality is correlated with peer relationships quality in adolescence on a spectrum of trust, communication, and support aspects. Armsden and Greenberg (1987) formalised the measurement of the construct of peer attachment itself by developing an Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment that measures trust, communication, and alienation in parental and peer relationships. Their work defined that parent and peer attachment is significantly differentiable and both are significantly correlated with adolescent wellbeing.

Notably, the structure of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment is very similar to the dimensions of the quality of peer relationships that were found in more recent systematic reviews (Delgado et al., 2022), and it is easy to integrate studies carried out in different decades and with different methodologies. This evidence leads to a multi-relationship model whereby parental attachment forms the baseline of relational security whereas peer attachment is specifically relevant in the functioning of peer-based close relationships (Armsden and Greenberg, 1987). They are not independent, parallel predictors but systems that interact. Rubin et al. (2004) showed that high-quality friendships can buffer the impact of worse parent-adolescent relations on psychosocial functioning, indicating that secure peer relations may be used as compensatory relational resources when parental attachment is less secure.

This result has significant practical implications as it suggests that adolescents are not merely prisoners of the quality of their early parental attachment, but they may learn other sources of relational security in relationships with their peers.

Another aspect of adolescent functioning that overlaps with attachment during this reorganisational phase is identity development. Having formed secure attachment, adolescents are more apt to do the type of autonomous exploration that identity formation needs, as they have internalised a sense that the relational world is safe enough to accept uncertainty and explore different ways of self-presentation (Bretherton, 1992; Allen and Miga, 2010). Insecure adolescents, on the other hand, might perceive identity exploration to

be threatening, either because they are too preoccupied with relational security to permit autonomous functioning, as in the case of anxious attachment, or because they are defensively against the type of self-reflection and sharing that identity development entails, as in the case of avoidant attachment.

Multi-relationship Model: Domain specificity provides additional nuance to the multi-relationship model. Miller and Hoicowitz (2004) established that adolescents have differentiated attachment-related beliefs regarding parents, close friends and romantic partners and that these beliefs predict relationship quality and longevity in each relationship domain independently. Romantic relationships are especially pertinent in this respect since they are a novel and emotionally challenging context of attachment where regulatory abilities are put to the test in a way that is substantially different to parental and peer relationships.

The strength of romantic attachment, coupled with the relative lack of experience in dealing with this kind of intimacy, renders the regulatory mechanisms of attachment particularly critical to wellbeing in this stage. Person-centred methods are a profile-based approach that provides a complementary approach to the study of individual differences in adolescent attachment. Flykt et al. (2021) found specific patterns of anxiety and avoidance in late adolescence that are characterised by different levels of these traits and associated the patterns with mental health outcomes and risk-taking behaviour. It is a method that takes into account the configuration of regulatory tendencies jointly, instead of considering anxiety and avoidance as separate dimensions, which is consistent with theoretical frameworks in which hyperactivating and deactivating strategies may interact in complex manners (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2016).

Overall, adolescent attachment can be explained by a developmental reorganisation model where parental attachment forms the regulatory base of subsequent relational functioning, peer attachment becomes more salient as a clear predictor of wellbeing, and various relational systems interact to facilitate or inhibit adjustment via transferable socioemotional competencies and domain-specific attachment beliefs (Allen and Miga, 2010; Delgado et al., 2)

Gender and Culture as Moderators of Attachment-Adjustment Associations

An overview of attachment studies needs to take into consideration the inconsistency found in the studies instead of interpreting inconsistency as a drawback. Systematic variability is informative: it tells us when and to whom the attachment styles have the most significant impact on adolescent adjustment and what circumstances maximise or minimize the protective or risk effects. Spruit et al. (2020) proved this principle in their multilevel meta-analysis of attachment and depression in youth, showing that gender, country, study design, type of attachment, and measurement instrument are important moderators of the attachment-depression relationship. The existence of these moderators substantiates the claim that the impact of attachment on adjustment is context-conditioned as opposed to being uniform. Gender moderation should be interpreted with caution since the detected gender variations in the attachment-adjustment relationships can be attributed to socialisation, culturally conditioned norms towards emotional expression, or biological factors, and all of these do not exclude each other (Spruit et al., 2020).

Girls tend to be socialised to be more emotionally expressive and relational-oriented, a factor that may enhance the social costs of anxious regulatory strategies and social benefits of secure attachment in peer relationships. Boys, whose socialisation tends to promote emotional restraint and independence, might be more prone to deactivating strategies irrespective of attachment security that can obscure attachment influences on social behaviour using traditional indicators. Instead of reinforcing generalisations, the synthesis implication is that gender must be viewed as a moderator which conditions the expression of attachment effects as opposed to a determiner of these effects. This aligns with findings in related meta-analytic areas that indicate that effect sizes vary in a systematic manner based on sample composition and circumstances (Fearon et al., 2010). The cultural context is substantively relevant as norms concerning emotional disclosure, relational dependence, autonomy, and the degree to which attachment needs can be expressed differ significantly across societies and influence the expression of attachment strategies, as well as the quality of relationships with peers (Spruit et al., 2020; Delgado et al., 2022). In interdependent cultures with strong group identification, such as the difference between secure and anxious attachment, the cultural consequences of such differences might not be as evident in terms of social consequences since close relational monitoring and emotion sensitivity are more culturally acceptable. Avoidant regulatory strategies might have less social cost in cultures that place more value on individual autonomy. These cultural scripts do not alter the underlying processes, regulation, appraisal, and support-seeking, but they influence the behavioural manifestation of the processes and the social impact thereof (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2016; Spruit et al., 2020). The implications of study design and moderation of measurement are significant to the interpretation of attachment results. Most studies on this topic are based on cross-sectional self-report studies, which restrict the conclusions that can be made regarding directionality and causation (Brumariu and Kerns, 2010; Spruit et al., 2020). The mediator meta-analytic work has explicitly pointed out that although cognitive-emotional processes between attachment and adjustment are plausible and have been supported by evidence, further longitudinal designs that can test the processes prospectively are required before causal statements can be made with certainty (Cortés-García et al., 2020).

A synthesis that explicitly takes note of this limitation is more plausible than one that exaggerates the power of causal inference that can be drawn based on the available evidence base. It is also notable that the measuring instrument of attachment gives a significant percentage of variance in the observed effect sizes that represents actual differences in what self-report questionnaires and interview-based measures measure about the quality and organisation of attachment representations. The same group of moderators that explain heterogeneity in the internalising results also explain heterogeneity in peer relationship quality results. This coalescence reinforces the overall synthesis since it means that cultural background, gender and methodological differences do not influence one area of adjustment without influencing the other but have a consistent effect on both social and emotional consequences.

The meta-analytic correlation between insecure attachment and anxiety (r about .30; Colonnesi et al., 2011) must be interpreted, in turn, as a mean of different populations and measurement situations, and the true strength of such a relationship is predictable and fluctuates in predictable ways with sample and design variables. Overall, moderator evidence attests to the fact that the effects of attachment on the adjustment

of adolescents are valid and conditionally dependent on the circumstances. Gender, culture, and methodological peculiarities determine the strength of observed associations and their interpretation and the combination of this evidence gives a more correct and adequately qualified account of the influence of attachment styles on adolescent development (Spruit et al., 2020; Colonnesi et al., 2011; Fearon et al., 2010).

Limitations

The available evidence is able to provide a consistent and practically significant description of adolescent development. Attachment styles formed in early caregiving relationships persist in influencing how adolescents negotiate the social and emotional challenges of adolescence via the regulatory mechanisms they carry into peer relationships, the emotional skills they acquire, and the interpretive schemas they use to make meaning of social experience. The awareness of this developmental continuity directly translates into the intervention: the need to facilitate secure attachment during adolescence and the need to build emotion regulation skills are not two distinct developmental projects but the components of a shared developmental project that facilitates social competence and emotional wellbeing.

Conclusion

The evidence concludes secure attachment as a strong protective factor for adolescent socio-emotional adjustment; on the other hand, insecure attachment, especially the anxious, avoidant and disorganised styles, is invariably linked with worse peer functioning, less adaptive emotion regulation, and higher internalising vulnerability. Emotion regulation arose as a crucial mechanism that links attachment security to relational and psychological outcomes over peer, romantic, and emerging adult contexts. Future studies must benefit from longitudinal, culturally heterogeneous, and multi-informant designs to help strengthen causal inference and to refine how we understand the developmental pathways through which attachment operates.

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