TRANSMISSION OF ATTACHMENT ACROSS THREE GENERATIONS

Diane Benoit, Infant Psychiatrist, The Hospital for Sick Children
Kevin Parker, Child & Family Unit, Kingston General Hospital

Adapted from Benoit D & Parker KCH (1994), Stability and Transmission of Attachment across Three Generations. Child Development, 65, 1444-1456. The research was supported by the Ontario Mental Health Foundation and the Ruth Schwartz Foundation.

Bowlby (1969/1982) suggested that internal working models are dynamic mental processes that influence an individual’s affect, behaviour, and perceptions of the self, others, and relationships. He also proposed that working models are stable within individuals and across generations. A major breakthrough in attachment research was the development of ways to “measure” a) working models of attachment in infants, using the Strange Situation (SS) and b) states of mind with respect to attachment in adults, using the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI).

The scoring of the AAI relies on characteristics of the adult’s descriptions (rather than on factual information). Based on the responses, the adult’s state of mind is classified as autonomous, dismissing, preoccupied, or unresolved.

• Autonomous adults are generally thoughtful, value attachment experiences and relationships, and freely examine the effects of past experiences on personal development. They provide balanced descriptions of one or both parents as loving during childhood, or if they were rejected or abused, they have forgiven their parent(s).

• Individuals classified as dismissing tend to dismiss attachment experiences as unimportant in influencing their personal development and their approach to their own children. They may insist that they cannot remember early events or their memories contradict or fail to support their generally idealized descriptions of early experiences.

• Preoccupied adults are often entangled with their early experiences and relationships. They rarely have difficulty remembering early events, but seldom present a coherent report of childhood experiences. They may still be dependent on their parents, want to please them inordinately, or are intensely angry with them.

• Individuals classified as unresolved may show characteristics of any of the above classifications, but they also have significant lapses in reasoning processes when discussing loss or trauma, e.g., confusion or disorientation when important losses or sexual and/or physical abuse are discussed.

Studies that have used both the AAI and the SS have documented an impressive 66-82% correspondence between parents’ responses to the AAI and infants’ behaviour towards their parents in the SS, whether examined prospectively, retrospectively, or concurrently (Fonagy et al., 1991; Grossmann et al 1988; Main & Goldwyn, 1984, in press; Zeanah et al, 1993). The specific adult-infant pairings are: autonomous-secure, dismissing-avoidant, preoccupied-resistant, and unresolved-disorganized/disoriented. These studies provide indirect evidence of cross-generational stability of attachment across two generations.

Our study contributes to the understanding of the AAI by examining the stability of AAI classifications within individuals, from pregnancy to eleven months after delivery, and the transmission of patterns of attachment across three generations.

The Study

We recruited 110 expectant mothers from local childbirth education classes, children’s and maternity clothing stores, physicians’ offices and newspaper articles and advertisements. Criteria for inclusion were that the expectant mother be at least eighteen years old, have an uncomplicated pregnancy and that her mother agree to participate in the study. Of these mothers, fourteen miscarried or decided not to participate and twelve of the remaining completed only parts of the study. Informed consent and general demographic information were obtained and the mothers were interviewed twice with the AAI: once during the last month of pregnancy and once two to four weeks before they were seen with their twelve-month-old infants in the SS. The maternal grandmothers were interviewed whenever they were available. Interviews with the mothers and grandmothers were conducted in the lab or in the subjects’ homes except for eight out-of-town grandmothers who were interviewed over the telephone. All mothers were Caucasian, most were married and from stable, middle- to upper-middle-class backgrounds. The infants were healthy, about half were firstborn and about half were boys. There were no significant differences in socio-economic status, maternal age, and education between mothers who completed the study and those who did not.

Findings

Results use both the three-category (autonomous, dismissing, preoccupied) and four-category (autonomous, dismissing, preoccupied, unresolved) AAI classifications.
An important finding is that maternal AAI classifications remained stable from pregnancy to eleven months after delivery in 90% and 77% of cases when the three- and four-category classification systems were used, respectively, suggesting that states of mind with respect to attachment are stable during adulthood. Although our sample showed a skew of attachment classifications toward security, the preoccupied classification was stable (87% and 71% using the three- and four-classification systems, respectively). Similarly, 76% of mothers classified as unresolved during the pregnancy were also classified as unresolved twelve months later. The dismissing classification was less stable within mothers in our sample (60% and 44% using the three- and four-classification systems, respectively). Possible mediators of stability within individuals of three-category adult attachment were examined, including life stresses, social support, self-esteem, and marital satisfaction, and no significant mediators were found among these variables.

A finding that 54% of grandmothers, compared to 30% of mothers, were classified as unresolved was somewhat unexpected, although not surprising. Because of their age, grandmothers have experienced more losses. In fact, the grandmothers in our sample experienced almost twice as many losses as their daughters. Those lost through death were often one or both parents, siblings, spouses, and even children. The number of losses combined with the significance of the persons lost, seem to make older adults more prone to unresolved mourning. The AAI scoring system does not account for when the grandmothers became unresolved following a loss or trauma. “Being” unresolved while raising children might affect the children, quality of caregiving, and transmission of attachment across generations differently from “becoming” unresolved later in life. Little is known about possible factors that might place individuals at risk for, or protect them against, unresolved mourning and trauma. While unresolved status in caregivers predicts disorganization in their infants, little is known about whether and how disorganization in infancy predisposes to unresolved classification later in life.

Most of our subjects were from intact, middle- to upper-middle-class families and it is possible that AAI classifications of adults from other backgrounds would be less stable. Nonetheless, our finding of 90% stability of AAI three-category classifications over twelve months in this sample is compelling. Another important finding on the three-category systems was that the mother’s AAI classification during pregnancy successfully predicted her infant’s SS classification at twelve months in 82% of cases. These findings on the stability of adult attachment and the predictive nature of maternal attachment during pregnancy on infants’ attachment, have implications for early identification of mother-infant dyads at risk for the development of relationship problems. Indeed, insecure maternal attachment as assessed by the three-category classification system has been overrepresented in clinical infant populations. This suggests that maternal security of attachment may act as a factor protecting against the development of a variety of problems in infants, whereas insecure maternal attachment may be a risk factor (Benoit et al., 1992).

Our study provides compelling evidence for Bowlby’s contention that attachment tends to be perpetuated across generations. When the three-category adult and infant attachment classifications were examined across three generations, 65% of the 77 grandmother-mother-infant triads for whom complete data sets were available, had corresponding attachment classifications in all three generations. These results must be viewed cautiously because of the skewed distribution of attachment toward security in the sample.

Bowlby suggested that what may be transmitted across generations is an internal working model of attachment relationships. Caregivers’ states of mind with respect to attachment may be derived from actual and perceived childhood experiences with attachment figures and may influence their own caregiving. This model suggests that what is transmitted across generations may be a state of mind communicated to the child via parental behaviour, especially parental response at times of stress (when the attachment system is activated). Although we did not directly examine mechanisms of transmission of attachment across generations, our findings add one more link in the chain of support for Bowlby’s beliefs about attachment.

References


