

Script-like attachment representations and behavior in families and across cultures: Studies of parental secure base narratives

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Abstract

The articles included in this Special Issue of *Attachment and Human Development* were originally presented as contributions to symposia at the Society for Research in Child Development (Atlanta, Georgia, April 2005) and at the European Developmental Psychology Conference (Laguna, Canary Islands, August 2005). The articles represent efforts of independent research teams studying the emergence, maintenance, and implications of attachment representations. In each study, a central measure of attachment representation was a recently described measure of the secure base script (Waters & Rodrigues-Doolabh, 2004). This measure assesses the “scriptedness” of secure base content in stories told in response to a set of word-prompts. Each paper included in this special issue addresses a specific issue relevant to the reliability, validity, or broader utility of the attachment script representation measure as an indicator of the respondent’s awareness of and access to a secure base script. The first paper provides a précis of the measure itself, including its conceptual underpinnings and the notion of “scriptedness” as it relates to the secure base construct. In the second article, the cross-time stability of the scriptedness scores is tested. The third and fourth articles present relations between the scriptedness score from the new measure and indices of state of mind about attachment from the Adult Attachment Interview (one sample of Italian mothers, the other in a sample of adolescents). The fifth article describes relations between the attachment script representation score and mother–child interaction during a memory reminiscence task. The final article in this set is a report on associations between the maternal attachment script representations and child attachment security for a sample of adopting mothers and adopted children. Taken together, these studies provide broad support for this new procedure and scoring system to capture important aspects of secure base knowledge for adults and also provide evidence for the relevance of secure base scripts in the socialization of child secure base behavior.

Keywords: *Representation of attachment, attachment script, validation studies*

Introduction

Central to the Bowlby/Ainsworth model of attachment development is the notion that the attached child first represents the attachment relationship as a sensorimotor pattern of behavior and interaction and that, in the context of continued interaction as well as

achievements in motor, cognitive, and language domains, attachments become internalized and represented in the mind (see Marvin & Britner, 1999, for a review and integration of findings concerning the development of attachment). Bowlby (1973, 1969/1982) suggested that the child and caregiver co-construct this mental representation (or internal working model) of their relationship over the infancy and childhood years and that this internal representation provides a means for making the caregiver “portable” to contexts in which she is not physically present, thus affording the possibility of exploration away from the caregiver for longer and longer periods of time without the interference associated with separation distress. Bowlby also believed that the mental representation of attachment informs evaluative and expectancy models of the self (e.g., as worthy of love and acceptance; as capable), of the caregiver (e.g., as loving and supportive; as willing to provide assistance as needed), and, with increasing age, of others who may participate in close relationships with the child (e.g, siblings, romantic partners) (see Bretherton & Munholland, 1999, for a more extensive review of the internal working model construct). Of course, the quality and utility of the mental representation of attachment was assumed to be critically contingent on the actual interaction history of the dyad and Bowlby (e.g., 1973, 1980, 1969/1982) expected that the full range of secure and insecure attachment histories would be apparent in the working models of children, adolescents, and adults.

Bowlby (e.g., 1973, 1988) believed that the internal representations of attachment relationships were real, specifiable products of the operation of the attachment behavioral system in the context of a history of dyadic exchange but he did not, at least when the working model concept was first articulated, have access to a validated conceptual framework from cognitive psychology or neuroscience that might be used to instantiate these representations as psychological or physical phenomena (see Bretherton & Munholland, 1999; Thompson & Raikes, 2003). Even so, he read widely in the literatures of cognitive psychology and behavioral biology and he was not shy about appropriating the best ideas he found there in support of his own theoretical framework. Initially, Bowlby adopted Craik’s (1943) notions about representation as mental model building or use to justify his own internal working model concept and he framed his developmental account of the (co-) construction of working models so as to be consistent with Piaget’s description of cognitive growth from infancy through early childhood (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999; Marvin & Britner, 1999). Later he adopted information processing constructs to bolster his account of how internal working models would operate in the service of managing affect in close interpersonal relationships for older children and adults (Bowlby, 1980).

The working model construct has been criticized on several fronts for being vague to the point of being metaphorical (e.g., Dunn, 1993; Thompson & Raikes, 2003), and for being overly extensive (Belsky & Cassidy, 1994; Hinde, 1988; Rutter & O’Connor, 1999) in terms of its purported explanatory range but, in our opinion, these criticisms miss the central point of Bowlby’s argument and ignore maturation in the cognitive sciences over the past 35 years. That is to say, Bowlby claimed that attachments become represented mentally and these representations are crucial for understanding the impact of attachment for personality development and psychosocial adjustment across the lifespan. He could not say for certain how the representations were structured or what the cognitive mechanisms and processes underlying these structures might be because the relevant cognitive constructs were themselves still being invented, but he was certain that representation of content was required. Bowlby took what was available and made the best of it. It remained for the community of attachment researchers to clarify the nature, structure, and processes connecting those mental representations to the individual’s actions and relationships in the external world.

In an ideal world, the lack of precision with regard to the nature of internal working models might have prompted members of the attachment research community to form alliances with cognitive psychologists (or artificial intelligence modelers) working on problems of mental representation to bring content and structure into alignment. Of course, the world in which developmental science is conducted is less than ideal and only a few attachment researchers found the time to become familiar with concepts and methods from cognitive psychology (e.g., Bretherton, 1990, 1993; Bretherton & Beeghly, 1982; Bretherton, McNew, Snyder, & Bates, 1983; Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990; Oppenheim & Waters, 1995). The limited collaborations between the attachment and cognitive development research communities did not, however, constrain the development of tasks and measures designed to assess internal working models for children, adolescents, and adults. Indeed, these measures have proliferated over the past 20 years or so and range from drawing tasks to depth interviews to doll-play story-completions to self-report questionnaires to naturalistic observation measures in typical contexts. In nearly all cases, test developers intend that their measures reveal the content of the respondent's internal working model of attachment or state of mind concerning attachment relationships. For the most part, validation of these measures has been in terms of relations between the content of the novel measure and the sensorimotor representation of attachment security scored from the Strange Situation (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). To the extent that structure of mental representation was considered, it concerned the degree to which categorization schemes for the novel measure showed correspondence with the classificatory scheme used by Ainsworth and associates (Ainsworth et al., 1978), with, perhaps, the addition of the disorganized attachment category described by Main and Solomon (1986).

The introduction and promotion of many measures of the content of attachment representations relevant beyond infancy and toddlerhood was useful insofar as it created a context in which Bowlby's vision of attachment as a lifespan phenomenon might be realized. Certainly one result of the introduction of these measures is the fact that attachment constructs are now central in the subfields of social, personality, clinical, and developmental psychopathology as well as developmental psychology (e.g., Cassidy & Shaver, 1999). However, the conceptual distance maintained between developmental scientists interested in attachment and those interested in cognitive development obscured several remarkable advances in the developmental understanding of several cognitive phenomena that have proven relevant to the development of internal representations of attachment. For example, recent accounts of episodic memory, especially with reference to autobiographical memory (e.g., Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Fivush, 1998; Howe & Courage, 1997; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Tulving, 2002) have established both the reality of neural substrate for episodic memory and the kinds of influences on autobiographical memory arising from experiences with parents, from gender, and from the culture itself. Likewise, advances in understanding the structural organization of information in memory and developmental changes these structures undergo (e.g., Nelson, 1986, 1996, 2000; Shank & Abelson, 1977, 1995) should be relevant to both the form and content of attachment representations. In addition, developmental understanding of prose and narrative production and relations between experience and narrative skills has advanced significantly (e.g., Bamberg, 1987; Burger & Miller, 1999; Dautenhahn, 2002; Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997; Waters, 1981; Waters & Hou, 1987; Waters, Hou, & Lee, 1993; Wigglesworth, 1997; Ziegler, Mitchell, & Currie, 2005). Perhaps the most critical message from cognitive development for attachment researchers is that cognitive content is intricately intertwined with the form or structure of cognition and, in many ways, structure constrains the content of a narrative.

Organization of the Special Issue

The studies reported in this special issue build on the accomplishments of Waters and associates in their studies of secure base scripts and their implications for parenting behavior, for parent–child interactions, and for social-emotional consequences of these interactions for children. Because each study included in this special issue uses the attachment script representation task designed by Waters and Rodrigues-Doolabh (2004), the first article in the set describes the task in detail and provides conceptual and empirical background that led to the design and development of the measure. To save space, methodological detail about the word-list prompt task is truncated in each of the subsequent articles. The second article (Vaughn, Verissimo, Coppola, Bost, McBride, Shin, & Korth) addresses the longitudinal stability of the secure base scriptedness scores for a sample of mothers who were assessed on two occasions, between 12 and 15 months apart. The third paper (Coppola, Vaughn, Cassibba, & Constantini) is an analysis of relations between the secure base scriptedness score and indices of maternal state of mind from the AAI in a sample of Italian mothers and maternal sensitivity in interactions. This study constitutes a replication of results reported by Waters and Rodrigues-Doolabh (2001) in a different sociocultural milieu and extends predictions from the secure base script to maternal sensitivity measures. In the fourth article (Dykas, Woodhouse, Cassidy, & Waters), relations between the scriptedness score and AAI dimensions are reported for a sample of adolescents. The fifth article (Bost, Shin, McBride, Vaughn, Coppola, Verissimo, et al.) is a report of mother–child interactions in the context of reminiscing about emotional events experienced by the child and the interactional correlates of maternal secure base scriptedness scores. This study directly addresses the socialization implications of maternal secure base representations and provides insights into the processes contributing to the transmission of those representations across generations. In the final report (Verissimo & Salvaterra), maternal secure base representations are assessed in a sample of Portuguese families with adopted children. The adopted child's secure base behavior was assessed independently. Consistent with previously reported findings, maternal attachment representations and adopted children's secure base behavior were significantly correlated. Taken together, the results of these studies suggest that the attachment script representation procedure will be an important tool for studying attachment in adults.

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