

Analysis on Predictors of Attachment Style

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the correlation between early attachment styles and certain parental and biological factors. Early attachment is a commonly used theory in early education, parent-child relationship therapy, and many other aspects in the field of child development. Parental factors are highly involved in early attachment formation, and its correlations with secure or insecure attachment were consistent in numerous studies. The author looked into different predictors of early parent-child attachment and evaluates some possible explanations of the predictive relationships. Although parenting and characteristics of parents were often argued in previous research, few studies focus on the internal features of infants that may relate to the early attachment. The author then discussed briefly how infant temperament and genetic agents may influence the internal working model of infants. Finally, the impacts of early attachment in children on future development are also discussed in the last few sections. Future directions on particular elements within the predictors and methodological problems in research design are suggested.

Key words: *Early attachment, parenting style, parental empathy, parent-child relationship*

1. INTRODUCTION

Attachment theory has a long development history since the 1960s. During the infant period and early childhood, children form mental representations of the world and the internal construction of relationships based on their interaction with their care-givers. This internal working model is considered essential for survival due to infants' inability to live independently [1]. With the interest to find out how to construct health attachment between parents and their children and to prevent disorganization attachment, several influential factors, both traditionally agreed or relatively new ones of early attachment are investigated in the current article. Parenting styles and child-rearing factors are closely investigated first, then parental empathy, as an effective factor of parents' behaviors within the parent-child relationship, is also evaluated with its possible influence on early attachment. In addition to parental factors, internal factors of infants and children are also discussed with their effects in the early attachment. Some possible reasons why these factors could be predictive for early attachment are included in the end, which may help with future research directions.

2. OVERVIEW OF ATTACHMENT THEORY

Based on the infants' reaction of separation from their caregivers, attachment styles are typically divided into three categories: secure, avoidant, and resistance [1]. Secure attachment is commonly seen in western population,

whereas insecure patterns, anxious and avoidant attachment, are not the majority ones in children. Behavioral patterns of a secure child include a tendency to explore the environment while the mother is around, becoming anxious when separated from the mother but easily calm down if she returns. Children with avoidant attachment show unwillingness to interact with their mother and not caring whether she leaves or not. Resistant attached child-mother relationship indicates a higher negative emotional reaction of children when they are separated from their mother, and resist to calming after their mother return. Later on, another type of insecure attachment style was suggested by scholars, which is a subtle combination of avoidant and resistant attachment called disorganized attachment. This is the rarest one found in children, and it is represented by children's disordered behavior under unfamiliar situations [2]. Once attachment styles are settled in early childhood, it is believed that certain behavioral patterns would only change subtly throughout life span unless targeted intervention is taken.

Attachment theory has far-reaching implications in many fields such as early education, family therapy focusing on parent-child relationships, legal practices relevant to custody issues. In general, attachment theory can be involved in any field of practice focusing on early child development. Interventions that target on improving the parent-child relationship and achieving secure attachment require an understanding of the formation of attachment patterns. Therefore, the reasons for children forming attachment insecurity (the resistant and avoidant patterns) are important for prevention purposes.

3. PARENTING AND CHILD CARE

3.1. Parenting Style

Individual differences between early attachment styles among infants are often elaborated through environmental factors. One predominating theory widely used to explain the formation of attachment is the parenting styles. Early studies categorize parenting styles based on two dimensions: parents' responses and demands [3], and consider parenting as a parent-to-child process that the parent is the primary feature in the behavioral change of children. With different levels of the two dimensions, Baumrind [4] determined parenting style as three individual categories: authoritative with high response and high demand, authoritarian with a low response and high demand, and permissive with high response and low demand.

In early studies, authoritative parenting among the three styles was found to be highly associated with child's positive development outcomes such as better school performance, healthier peer relationships, and overall competence [4], and the positive correlation was expected to be consistent with attachment security. A positive relationship is seen in adoptive children. In a cross-culture study, Liu & Hazler [5] assessed parenting style in western families and the early attachment style of adopted foreign children. A relatively new measurement of attachment, Attachment Q-Set (AQS), was used in this study, which determined the child's attached relationship with fathers and categorized their attachment styles as secure and dependent. Within this classification, attachment dependency refers to the temperamental propensities of children. The researchers found that authoritative parenting did indeed predict secure attachment in 12~36 month-old children in adoptive families. In contrast, permissive parenting was found to be negatively associated with attachment security [5]. With such a result, specific factors within different parenting styles should be closely investigated to see whether they could have an impact on attachment security independently. For example, the difference between parenting styles assessed in previous studies is the levels of parental response and demand. Permissive and authoritative parenting both have a high level of parental response, yet their relationships with early attachment are inverted. It is possible that the key feature causing this variance is the level of demandingness in parenting. With high demand, children are able to understand parents' expectations for them that they know what to react to. Demanding and responsive together constitute a two-direction relationship between parents and children, therefore form a more secure and healthier attachment.

3.2. Parental Adult Attachment

Regarding that parenting style as a predictor of child attachment, other parental factors may also involve in this positive relationship whether directly or indirectly. In a study examined parenting, the result shows that parental adult attachment style is also related to how parents educate their children [6]. For initial adult romance attachment theory, the relationship between adult lovers could be classified as secured, avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent attachment. In this theory, the anxious-ambivalent attached relationship refers to a kind of possessive love. With a high level of secure attachment, adults reported a more authoritative parenting style [6]. This finding is consistent with a more recent study [7], which indicated that parental attachment security is positively associated with authoritative parenting and negatively associated with authoritarian and permissive parenting styles. Both studies chose Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ) as a measurement of adult attachment, but different self-report questionnaires were used to determine parenting style. Combining the previous findings, it is reasonable to speculate that parents' secure adult attachment style may also be a predictor of early attachment of children.

3.3. Child Care

In addition to parenting styles, studies have found that early attachment is highly associated with both quantity and quality of child care as well. Caldera and Hart [8] investigate how the intensity of child care affects the formation of secure attachment. In their study, structured mother-child interaction tasks were given to participants, during which the mothers' sensitivity and involvement level were observed and coded. Results show that the relationship between child care and secure attachment is positively related when the mother's parenting is less-optimal but negative when a child gets more optimal parenting.

4. EMPATHY

Apart from child-rearing, there are other characteristics of parents that have been found related to early attachment. Empathy, as one of these factors that are not often seen in empirical studies, refers to the capacity of understanding others' emotions and internal perceptions. Prior studies investigating empathy and attachment have adopted observation, questionnaires, and other alternative methods and overall suggested that parental empathy is significantly related to child's development of self-esteem, aggressive behaviors, and parent-child attachment [9].

A significant difference was found specifically in mothers' empathy level between those who have a secure attachment with their children and that of insecure attachment. Mothers who did better on understanding

children's motives and psychological needs are more likely to develop a secure attachment with their child, whereas lower empathy level of mothers is then related to insecurely attached mother-child relationship [10]. This result provides evidence that lack of empathy is a predictive factor for insecure attachment, and it, therefore, suggests that the ability of understanding purpose and internal motives of children's behavior is not only important but also necessary for developing an early secure attachment. This finding is consistent with other studies that used different measures. In a study establishing the validity of a relatively new parental empathy assessment, the Parental Affective and Cognitive Empathy Scale, parental empathy is positively associated with attachment security in children [11]. Perceiving children's thoughts and emotions is a necessary premise to satisfy their needs, which is an important component when considering the formation of secure attachment.

However, more aspects in addition to the sensitivity of children's internal mental processes should be added to the discussion. Commonly, parents can identify children's thoughts and motives but still cannot satisfy their needs. For example, when children engage in aggressive behaviors, parents are likely to stop them even though they may understand the reasons for these behaviors. In this kind of cases, the difference between parents with high empathetic understanding and that of with low level of empathy may be represented through specific parenting methods. The former type of parents may focus on their children's emotions and circumstances depending on the reasons they become aggressive. This speculation then leads to consideration of parenting styles discussed in the previous section. The relationship of empathy and parenting styles among adults has not been closely investigated in empirically studies, yet these factors are both commonly seen in parent-child relationship therapies.

5. OTHER PREDICTORS

5.1. Infant Temperament

When evaluating possible predictors of early attachment, previous researches often focuses on environmental factors that infants would experience, yet internal effects such as biological contributions and psychological characteristics of children themselves were investigated little. Infant temperament, as one of the internal features of children, is a relatively prevail one. As temperament research develops, several different temperament theories emerge in early studies. Though researchers view temperament with different characterizations, the central concept of temperament remains the biological traits of children develop in early life [12]. In a meta-analysis review investigating the relationship between early attachment and temperament, researchers found that negative temperament and resistant attachment is associated, but no significant association was found in negative temperament and other

types of attachment [12]. The result also suggests that, on a certain level, there are overlapping in temperament and attachment constructs.

5.2. Genes

With the development of modern methodology, researches on biological and genetic aspects of early attachment become more prevail. For example, early attachment behaviors were found to be associated with certain gene polymorphisms such as D4 dopamine receptor, variants of 48 base pair tandem repeat [13]. However, the association is often seen not independently but with the interaction of other environmental factors like maternal behaviors and cumulative demographic factors [14]. Biological and genetic factors in this field have been studied more about their relationship with certain behaviors, instead of discussing the functions or the role they play in a whole theory system. It is understandable that the current methodology is limited to infant attachment studies, but genetic targeted research still shows a promising future.

6. DISCUSSION

The predictive factors of early attachment in the previous studies combined show us family context is essential for forming an early intimate relationship with caregivers, which laid the foundation for future complex social relationships. The way that parental and internal factors influence how children perceive their relationship often shares similarities in many other aspects. For instance, parenting is itself a complex set of behaviors and cognitive processes that correlates with the children's well being instead of just the early attachment styles. Behavior patterns of parents would be closely observed by children, and these patterns that children learned at an early age may form standards of how they treat themselves and other people in the future. When parents show high demandingness, children might be more likely to obtain higher self-control than those with lower demand parents. With the high responsiveness of parents, children would be less likely to form high sensitivity of rejection, which may help them reduce social anxiety when they are interacting with people outside the family by not worrying about rejections of others. Therefore children would be more likely to build a healthy and secure relationship both in their family and in society. Secure early attachment then becomes the first outcome in this process. As for other factors involved in early relationship formation, similar impacts may occur based on children's learning behavior. When children see how their parents interpret and react to their behaviors, the empathy level of parents then is observed by children. As the first source of understanding people other than themselves, early relationship pattern between parents and children is essential for children to generalize to future social interaction.

Based on the possible consequences mentioned above, therapy and intervention targets on the parent-child relationship should look more into the risk factors of insecure attachment as well. In prior studies, the insecure early attachment was found to be associated with future dysfunction and mental health problems [15]. However, myriad practical problems should be considered when talking about real-life applications of early attachment theory. In most previous studies investigating attachment influences, attachment of children was often discussed with a single figure in the family or their mother specifically. However, composition of families is more diverse nowadays. Different family situations would add more child-rearing factors based on their culture, sex-dyad type, or economic level, etc. The importance of family variance is one of the possible directions for future studies. For example, the associations discussed in this article may not be consistent within single-parent families or same-gender parents, or cross-cultural factors may affect the relationship between these predictors and early attachment formation. Furthermore, the methodology of studying early attachment varies in previous researches, which leads to consideration of the consistency and generalizability of the results, thus may require a more thorough review of the experiment and study design. The need for farther investigation for this topic of early attachment still exists.

7. CONCLUSION

Researches have suggested that multiple environmental and internal factors are predictive for early attachment in human infants. Combining the results of discussed studies, the early attachment was found to have a generally consistent positive relationship with parenting style, parental empathy, temperament, and certain genetic factors. Within each category of attachment styles, the intensity of the predictive relationship with each factor is different. Future studies may focus on the specific component and influential features within parenting theories and biological factors and more influential context features, which may provide a more in-depth understanding of the formation of early attachment.

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