



Impact of Attachment History on Development of Social Relationships Through Emotion Regulation

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Abstract. Attachment theory, since its discovery, has drawn substantial attention in the research community. Since Bowlby's proposal of attachment as an innate need for infants in the last century, several influential researchers such as Harlow and Ainsworth followed up and made impactful progress that confirmed Bowlby's opinion and further developed the foundation and application in this field. Although the formation of attachment styles is important, since evidence shows that early attachment history has an impact on individuals' development of relationships later in life, only a limited population has sufficient knowledge on the significance of this subject. This document aims to uncover the association between attachment history in childhood and social relationships in adulthood and present to the public the impact of early attachment on an individual's quality of social relationships later in life. The main method of this research is to review previous pertinent literature through online scholarly search engines. The research found that early attachment history does have an influence on different social relationships, such as romantic relationships and friendships, through emotion regulation. Specifically, evidence indicates that attachment security is positively associated with emotion regulation, and better emotion regulation is positively associated with qualities of romantic relationships and friendships. However, little evidence has been found on the impact of emotion regulation on family relationships, which needs to be further studied.

Keywords: Attachment Theory · Early Education · Social Relationship · Parental Education · Romantic Relationship

1 Introduction

The theory of attachment has long been discussed since its introduction by John Bowlby in the early twentieth century and has been shown to influence many aspects of human development [1]. For example, securely attached children were more likely to have better resilience and competence in adulthood [2]. On the other hand, insecurely attached children may have trouble with social relationships and are low in trust or confidence when they grow up. Two attachment theories are mainly discussed by scholars: the learning/behaviorist theory of attachment, primarily studied by Dollard and Miller, and

the evolutionary theory of attachment, mainly studied by Bowlby, Harlow, and Lorenz [3–6]. This paper mainly focuses on the evolutionary perspective of attachment, which suggests that infants have in-built needs to form an attachment with other people [4]. This view was not only demonstrated by Harlow in his infamous monkey study but also elaborated by Bowlby in his review of works of literature [4, 5]. In his study, Harlow proved that the early attachments were formed due to receiving comfort and a safe base rather than simply getting fed, which verified the perspective of the evolutionary theory of attachment. In Bowlby's work, he claimed that the mother was the most crucial attachment figure that infants formed an attachment to (monotropy). In his review of literature, Bowlby also quoted Freud's idea that the relationship with mother acted as the prototype of all later love relations for both sexes, which signified the influence of development of early attachment to later social relationships [4].

Forming and maintaining useful and reliable social relationships is one of the indispensable skills human beings have as social animals. Having unhealthy or a lack of social relationships can be detrimental to life. Holt-Lunstad and colleagues found that there was a 50% greater likelihood of survival for people with adequate social relationships than those with poor or insufficient relationships [7]. To avoid tragedy and sustain a healthy life in human society, people have developed to learn how to form good relationships. For example, Canevello and Crocker suggested that perceived partner responsiveness was key to forming close and satisfying relationships and could be approached by projecting or reciprocating responsiveness [8]. In addition, Hassebrauck and Fehr identified four dimensions indicating the quality of relationships: intimacy, agreement, independence, and sexuality. These elements were also correlated with other factors pertinent to close relationships, such as trust, love, commitment, and the like [9]. Besides these factors, the formation and maintenance of social relationships could also be affected by early attachment, as mentioned above. For instance, Grunebaum and colleagues found that people with major depressive episodes who had less secure and more avoidant attachment styles were correlated with an increased risk of suicide attempts, which corresponded to the correlation between poor or lack of social relationships and high mortality [7, 10]. Yaakobi and Goldenberg also found ties between attachment and social relationships [11]. Their study suggested that social ties and initiation of relationships could be predicted by attachment security level. Specifically, people with a secure attachment style were situated best socially; the less avoidant individuals were, the more willing they were to deliver information; the more anxious, the less willingness individuals had to deliver threatening information. This evidence demonstrates that attachment styles are tightly related to social behaviors and can affect social interaction and, thus, the formation of social relationships.

With all the evidence presented above, this paper aims to unfold the relations and interactions between attachment and social relationships by reviewing pertinent previous literature. The study may shed light on childhood education, both for children and for parents, since attachment is mainly and critically formed in the early stage of life and has had a huge influence on a person's life ever since.

2 Theory of Attachment

2.1 Bowlby's Attachment Theory

Bowlby is one of the first psychologists to investigate and set the foundation for attachment theory. He explored attachment from an evolutionary perspective and claimed that attachment was an innate ability for infants [4]. Besides, Bowlby divided the formation of attachment into four stages: pre-attachment stage, attachment-in-the-making stage, clear-cut attachment stage, and formation of reciprocal relationships stage, all of which occur between birth and 2-year-old [12]. Bowlby also pointed out that attachment history had a lifelong impact on individuals as they grew into adulthood.

2.2 Harlow's Monkey Study

One of the most famous or infamous studies in the field of attachment theory should be Harry Harlow's rhesus monkey study, where he used maternal deprivation to prove that infant monkeys have an internal need for comfort and a safe base instead of merely a need for feeding [5]. Harlow took infant monkeys apart from their birth mothers and instead raised them with two surrogate mothers: one provided food, while the other provided comfort by being covered with a cloth. The result of the study showed that although baby monkeys sought the feeding mother monkey for food, they still preferred to spend more time with the clothed mother, especially in situations requiring a safe base. Harlow's study further confirmed Bowlby's opinion regarding attachment being an innate demand.

2.3 Ainsworth and Main's Attachment Styles

Mary Ainsworth divided attachment styles into three types in her famous "Strange Situation" study in 1970 [13]. The three attachment styles were: secure, avoidant, and ambivalent. Later, Mary Main developed another attachment style: disorganized attachment [14]. Each style they categorized helped to predict a particular pattern of interaction between caretaker and infant.

Secure: infants with secure attachment treat the primary carer as a safe base to explore the strange situation. They show a clear preference for the caregiver and are comforted when the caregiver is present.

Avoidant: avoidant children tend to avoid interaction with the carer and are not interested in entertainment. These children seem not to care about the leave of the carer. They do not differentiate the ways between treating a stranger from treating the caregiver as well.

Ambivalent: ambivalent children act as the name indicates: they are anxious when the caregiver leaves, but they are also angry when the caregiver comes back. It is suggested that their anxiety with caregivers comes from inconsistent attachment patterns.

Disorganized: disorganized children usually present stereotypical behaviors such as freezing and rocking and do not seem to know how to attach. The formation of this attachment style is mainly due to maltreatment or neglect in some way.

Together, the four attachment styles they developed became a symbol of attachment theory and were frequently used in real-world applications.

3 Impact of Attachment on Relationships

3.1 Attachment and Emotion Regulation

This study aims at finding the correlation between attachment and social relationships. Previous studies have shown that although social relationships in adulthood do not completely replicate the early attachment styles, early attachment history does have some impact on later relationships [15]. This paper prepares to unfold the impact of attachment orientation on social relationships from the perspective of emotion regulation. Researchers pointed out that attachment styles had an evident impact on emotion regulation [16]. Specifically, securely attached individuals were more optimistic with difficulties in life and better at implementing emotion-regulation strategies. While securely attached people were effectively coping with life crises and managing negative emotions, insecurely attached individuals were having trouble regulating their emotions in a proper and efficient way. For example, avoidant individuals tended to block or inhibit emotional states that might activate attachment needs when regulating emotions.

3.2 Attachment and Social Relationship

The social relationship is defined as connections between people who have recurrent interactions and have personal meaning to the participants [17]. Typical social relationships include family ties, friendships, romantic relationships, neighborhoods, and work relationships. From the embodiment of different attachment styles, it is implicated that individuals' performance in social relationships can be influenced by their attachment history and behavior pattern, especially in close relationships that may display similar patterns to the mother-infant relationship.

3.3 Romantic Relationship

As one of the most important social relationships in one's life, a romantic relationship, once seriously established, usually accompanies an individual till his or her death. However, the romantic relationship might be one of the social relationships that are most likely to be affected by attachment history due to the similarity of closeness and uniqueness between romantic partners and that between mothers and children. Simpson and colleagues found that different early attachment styles were linked to different levels of ability to deal with social relationships [18]. Previous findings showed that attachment security not only correlated to good emotion regulation in childhood, it also predicted better ability in emotion regulation in adulthood [19, 20]. Salvatore and colleagues also found in their study that individuals who had attachment security in their early childhood tended to be better at rebounding from conflicts in a romantic relationship in their adulthood, which not only helped another person in this relationship to recover from conflict but also increased the satisfaction of this relationship [21]. These findings showed that attachment history had a significant impact on a romantic relationship. Specifically, a securely attached individual, through regulating emotions, could benefit a romantic relationship by effectively recovering himself or herself from a conflict, helping the partner

to recover from the conflict, and eventually making both parties in the relationship satisfied. Therefore, attachment history has been proven by evidence to enforce a profound impact on one's romantic relationship later in life.

3.4 Friendship

Not only are romantic relationships affected by the ability of emotion regulation, other social relationships are also influenced by this factor. Besides romantic relationships, friendship is another social relationship that is crucial for an individual's social life since it is another vital channel for one to seek social support and establish social value. Lopes and colleagues suggested that students who were better at emotion regulation had more positive relationships with others and fewer conflicts with close friends [22]. Studies repeatedly found that emotion regulation abilities were significantly associated with reciprocal friendship nomination, which was to see if the two classmates both recognize each other as friends [23]. Based on extensive evidence that emotion regulation abilities are positively associated with the quality of friendship, and attachment security predicts better emotion regulation abilities, it is reasonable to suggest that attachment security is positively associated with the quality of friendship.

3.5 Family Relationship

Attachment comes from one of the tightest relationships as well as one of the family relationships: the mother-infant relationship. As stated above, attachment styles can effectively influence an individual's emotion regulation abilities, which leads to the inquiry on the relations between family relationships and emotion regulation. Substantial evidence has shown that behaviors within a family profoundly affect children's emotion regulation abilities. Morris and colleagues pointed out that children learn about emotion regulation through observational learning [24]. For children, it is most likely that the main object they learn from and the individuals they spend the most time with are their parents. Thus, parents' behaviors, such as parenting styles and their attachment relationships with children, should contribute to the development of emotion regulation. It was also found by Morris and colleagues that emotional climate within the family had a significant impact on emotion regulation, which was embodied by attachment relationship, parenting style, marital relationship, and family expressiveness [24]. Although plenty of studies have suggested that family background has a profound influence on one's formation of emotion regulation, little research has focused on the reverse relationship: how emotion regulation ability affects family relationships? There is a considerable possibility that these two factors are positively related, but further studies are required to verify such a hypothesis.

4 Social Problems and Prevention

As the world enters a more and more unstable circumstance, it is gradually evident that upholding the stability of people's minds becomes one of the inevitable challenges for

every country. The social relationship is one of the key components to linking individuals, exchanging physical and mental values, and adjusting the stability of mental and emotional states. It is important for the public to pay attention to the health of social relationships since it is currently declining. One of the most demonstrating pieces of evidence that have been presented for several years is the increasing divorce rate. The divorce rate in China has continuously risen from 0.96‰ in 2000 to 2.0‰ in 2010 [25, 26]. However, these are merely problems on the surface. One of the more profound issues is that some parents fail to form a secure attachment with their children in their early childhood. As reviewed in this document, attachment security is beneficial for establishing healthy close relationships and solving conflicts in social relationships later in life, while attachment insecurity may lead to worsening relationship problems. Therefore, education on attachment theory needs to be heeded and implemented by the public, especially those who are already or ready to be parents.

Studies have indicated that attachment insecurity is often formed due to maltreatment in early childhood [27]. Researchers also found that insecurely attached individuals often experienced unstable and inadequate distress regulation in their early childhood [16]. These findings suggested that to avoid attachment insecurity and form attachment security, parents or primary caregiver should provide as much availability and satisfaction as possible for children in their early childhood, especially before the age of two, which was the critical period for the formation of attachment.

5 Conclusion

From Bowlby to Ainsworth, pioneers proposed theories of attachment and established the foundation of this field of study. Bowlby described attachment as an innate demand for infants. Harlow then confirmed his opinion by demonstrating the baby monkeys' natural needs for comfort in the rhesus monkey study. Ainsworth and Main brought attachment theory one step further by creating the structure of attachment styles, which was widely adopted in subsequent studies. Based on these preceding theories, researchers later found that attachment history had a significant impact on emotion regulation, which affected an individual's performance in different social relationships. Among all kinds of social relationships, the romantic relationship is the one that is most evidently influenced by attachment history. Studies showed that securely attached individuals exhibited better elasticity when facing conflicts and eventually helped both parties overcome conflicts in a romantic relationship, which, specifically, was operated through emotion regulation. Another vital relationship affected by attachment through emotion regulation is friendship. Evidence indicated that people who regulated emotions better were more likely to form and maintain positive friendships with others. Moreover, these kinds of individuals were more likely to be mutually recognized as friends. The last social relationship that plays a significant role in an individual's life is the family relationship. Substantial previous studies have shown that family context influences the development of children's emotion regulation. However, little research has been done on how family relationships are affected by the emotional regulation of family members. It is reasonable to hypothesize that family members' emotion regulation abilities are positively associated with the

quality of family relationships, but further studies need to be taken place. To summarize, all the evidence above together suggest that attachment history indirectly influences social relationship through emotional regulation.

Although attachment theory has been a heated topic recently, there are still some blanks waiting to be filled in this field of study. Since the public has the responsibility to understand the significance of early attachment history, yet so far, a merely limited population has knowledge on such a topic, it is important for researchers to point out how attachment history in one's early childhood may affect one's life in adulthood. More research is advocated to be done in terms of the impact of attachment history on individuals' social abilities later in life, such as how family relationships may be influenced by one's early attachment history through emotion regulation. Once the public realizes the importance of early attachment, there will be a call for the prevention of attachment insecurity. Education on the formation of attachment and methods of establishing attachment security can be one of the preventive measures, and further methods need to be discovered.

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