



Attachment styles, social skills and loneliness in young adults

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Abstract

A total of 183 university students completed measures of attachment, social and emotional loneliness, and social skills. Results indicate that secure attachment and social skills are related on several significant dimensions. Other findings reveal that attachment security and social skills are significantly related to loneliness, representing a replication and extension of previous research (Riggio, Throckmorton, & DePaola, 1990). These results lend support to the notion that securely attached individuals are socially skilled, and that social competence is related to lower perceived levels of loneliness. Finally, regression analyses indicated that the link between secure and fearful attachment, and social loneliness was mediated, in part, by social skills. It is suggested that attachment theory may provide a useful framework for the study of social competence and adjustment.

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An individual's initial attachment is established early in development with her/his primary caregiver(s). This relationship provides the cognitive framework that informs how an individual will perceive and interact with his/her world beyond early childhood (Bowlby, 1969; Collins & Read, 1994). When these attachment representations, or working models, are formed in a loving, supportive environment, a child will have a secure base from which to explore and master his/her environment. This positive frame of reference provides a sense of self-efficacy, thereby facilitating an adolescents' successful transition to adulthood (Rice, FitzGerald, Whaley, & Gibbs, 1995). Transition from late adolescence to adulthood is often approached from the individuation perspective, which contends that this period is characterized by a process of separating from primary dependence on parents to reliance on self. Attachment theory, along with corroborating research,

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posits that working models will have an effect on the individuation process (e.g. Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Berman & Sperling, 1991; Heiss, Berman, & Sperling, 1996; Kenny, 1987; Kenny & Rice, 1995; Rice, 1990). Paradoxically, at the same time as adolescents are moving towards independence during transition to adulthood, this also appears to also be a period of heightened reliance on attachment relationships (Kenny & Rice, 1995).

Bartholomew (1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) proposed that attachment could best be explained in terms of how individuals perceive themselves and others in relationships. This model not only integrates previous work on adult attachment but is also based on Bowlby's (1973) suggestions that different working models comprise different views of self and others in relationships. Four prototypes emerge on the basis of positive and negative views of self and others in relationships. Individuals with both a positive self-view and a positive view of others are classified as secure. These individuals generally have high self-esteem and are trusting of others. Pre-occupied individuals are characterized by a negative view of themselves and a positive view of others, resulting in high dependence on others. People with both a negative image of themselves and others are conceptualized as being fearful of intimate relationships and socially avoidant (Brennan, Shaver, & Tobey, 1991). Dismissing individuals may have high self-esteem (positive view of the self) and a suppressed desire to engage in intimate relationships (negative view of others). These individuals are seen as having low sociability, while fearful individuals are viewed as being shy (Duggan & Brennan, 1994).

Investigators often use measures of psychosocial adjustment as indicators of the individuation process (see Kenny & Rice, 1995 for a review). A smooth transition is often evaluated in terms of the ease by which adolescents adjust to adulthood. Although there are direct indices for the transition, adjustment is often measured using indirect measures of psychosocial functioning, such as loneliness (Kenny & Rice, 1995). Loneliness is one component of psychosocial functioning that researchers have examined in relation to adult attachment (e.g. Shaver & Hazan, 1992). DiTommaso and Spinner (1993, 1997) developed a tripartite model differentiating between family, romantic, and social loneliness. The relationship between attachment and loneliness has been thoroughly examined (e.g. DiTommaso & Brannen-McNulty, submitted for publication; DiTommaso & Spinner, 1997). In addition, research has shown a consistent negative correlation between loneliness and social skills (e.g. Riggio, 1986; Riggio, Watring, & Throckmorton, 1993; Segrin, 1993). Theorists have proposed that attachment working models may provide the foundation for the development of social skills (Goldberg, 2000). Attachment has been linked to aspects of social competence including social support seeking (Blain, Thompson, & Whiffen, 1993; Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, & Russell, 1994), social adjustment and social self-efficacy (Rice, Cunningham, & Young, 1997), social desirability (Rice, Cole, & Lapsley, 1990), and dating competence (Kenny, 1987).

A model proposed by Riggio (1986, 1989) assesses emotional and social skills, each as a set of particular interpersonal abilities that facilitate social interaction. Emotional and social skills are measured through expressivity, control, and sensitivity. Emotional expressivity is defined as the ability to show emotions and express feelings. Emotional sensitivity refers to empathetic ability. Emotional control is the ability to inhibit or display a particular emotion at will. Social expressivity refers to the use of body language and other social signals, and social sensitivity is the ability to interpret these signals. Finally, social control is the ability to willfully control one's social behaviour. Riggio and colleagues (1990, 1993) found these skills are related to higher levels

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