



Interdependence of attachment styles and relationship quality in parent-adolescent dyads



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Attachment
Adolescent
Parent
Dyadic
Actor-partner interdependence model
Relationship quality

ABSTRACT

The current study examined how attachment styles of parents and adolescents may jointly influence the quality of their relationship. Parent-adolescent ($N_{\text{dyads}} = 77$) pairs were recruited from a Midwestern town in the United States. The mean of adolescents' age was 16.25. Both members reported their attachment styles, relationship closeness, and relationship discord. The Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) showed that both members' attachment avoidance was associated with self-report lower levels of closeness. Parents' attachment anxiety was related to relationship discord. Parents with higher avoidant attachment reported lower closeness when adolescents were higher in avoidant attachment. Higher parents' anxious attachment was related to higher relationship closeness when adolescents were higher on anxious attachment. Such an association was negative when adolescents had lower anxious attachment. Higher parents' anxious attachment was related to greater discord when adolescents were lower on anxiety attachment. This study reveals the complex dyadic dynamics of relationship quality in parent-adolescent pairs.

Relationship quality with parents has important implications for adolescents' psychosocial functioning. Adolescents who have warm and less conflictual relationships with parents are less likely to suffer from psychological symptoms and they are more capable of forming well-functioning peer relationships (for a review, see Steinberg, 2001). Although the determinants and outcomes of parent-adolescent relationship quality have been well-examined (Steinberg, 2001), most existing studies have adopted an individual-level analysis which assumes adolescents' and parents' individual characteristics (e.g., pubertal status, temperament, parenting) are *independently* related to their relationship quality. Unfortunately, this approach has prevented us from better understanding how adolescents and parents may *jointly* shape the quality of their relationships. Indeed, interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Kelley et al., 2003) argues that any dyadic relationship outcomes should be conceptualized as the independent and interaction effects of the two members' characteristics. Accordingly, parent-adolescent relationships are a mutually regulated system in which both members' attachment styles may have independent and interactive effects on their quality of relationships. The current study integrated interdependence theory (Kelley et al., 2003) and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) to examine how attachment styles of adolescents and parents may independently and jointly relate to their perceptions of relationship closeness and conflict.

1. Adolescent attachment and parent-adolescent relationship quality

Attachment theory postulates that the quality of infant-caregiver interactions during early ages gives rise to cognitive or mental

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representations of close relationships (Bowlby, 1969). Interactions with attachment figures who are sensitive and responsive will facilitate the development of attachment security, or a sense of confidence about the availability of the attachment figures. In contrast, attachment figures who are cold and rejecting or inconsistent will facilitate the development of attachment insecurity, or a sense of worries about others' availability and uncertainty about self-worth.

Although seminal works on attachment (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) have adopted a categorical approach to conceptualizing attachment styles (secure, anxious/avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent), one common conceptualization of attachment styles in adolescence and adulthood is a two dimensional model: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Crowell, Fraley, & Roisman, 2016; Fraley & Shaver, 2000). The attachment anxiety component governs the extent to which individuals monitor their attachment figures' availability or cues of rejection, and their heightened efforts to seek intimacy and closeness. The attachment avoidance component governs the extent to which individuals distrust their attachment figures, and their heightened efforts to maintain a sense of self-reliance and independence.

Although attachment styles are assumed to form during infancy and childhood, attachment-related mental representations result in trait-like attachment styles that continue to guide expectations, attitudes, and behaviors in adolescent and adult relationships (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Thus, as adolescents mature, their relationship quality with parents should become increasingly stable and consistent with their mental representations derived from their history of interactions (Laursen & Collins, 2009). Supporting this idea, studies that employed the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) found that adolescents with higher attachment security or who were classified as secure (vs insecure) had more communication and trust in their relationships with parents (Allen et al., 2003), experienced more parental monitoring/supervision (Scott, Briskman, Woolgar, Humayun, & O'Connor, 2011), less parental neglect (Borelli, Compare, Snively, & Decio, 2015), and displayed more positive behaviors (e.g., mutual validation, empathy, engagement) and fewer negative behaviors (e.g., anger, avoidance) in observed parent-adolescent interactions (Allen, Porter, McFarland, McElhaney, & Marsh, 2007; Allen et al., 2003; Becker-Stoll, Fremmer-Bombik, Wartner, Zimmermann, & Grossmann, 2008; Kobak, Cole, Ferenz-Gillies, Fleming, & Gamble, 1993; Scott et al., 2011).

Research that captured adolescent attachment with self-report questionnaires (e.g., Experiences of Close Relationship; ECR) has similar findings. Specifically, adolescents with higher attachment avoidance and anxiety reported less parental supportiveness and responsiveness (Brenning, Soenens, Braet, & Bal, 2011; Brenning, Van Petegem, Vanhalst, & Soenens, 2014; Shomaker & Furman, 2009), more parental psychological control and less autonomy (Brenning et al., 2014; Van Petegem, Beyers, Brenning, & Vansteenkiste, 2013), and more negative interactions (e.g., conflict; Shomaker & Furman, 2009). Furthermore, adolescents with higher self-report attachment avoidance and anxiety were less willing to seek parental support in an observed problem-solving task (Dujardin et al., 2016). A longitudinal study of adolescents found that changes in self-report attachment anxiety and avoidance were related to changes in the positive features (e.g., relationship satisfaction, parental approval) and negative features (e.g., parental pressure/control, criticism) in parent-adolescent relationships (Ruhl, Dolan, & Buhmester, 2015). Based on past research, therefore, we hypothesized that adolescents' avoidance and anxiety would be related to lower closeness and higher discord with their parents.

2. Parental romantic attachment and parent-adolescent relationship quality

Parent-adolescent relationships are considered a mutually regulated system in which both members' characteristics may exert independent influences on their quality of interactions (Cox & Paley, 1997; Laursen & Collins, 2009). Therefore, it is not surprising that parents' attachment styles, often measured by self-report experiences of past romantic relationships, are important correlates of parenting behaviors and parent-child relationship quality (Feeney, 2006; Jones & Cassidy, 2014; La Valley & Guerrero, 2012; Millings, Walsh, Hepper, & O'Brien, 2012). For instance, research showed that parents' attachment anxiety and avoidance with regard to romantic relationships were related to less responsive caregiving to their children and better parenting styles (e.g., more authoritative, less authoritarian and permissive) (Millings et al., 2012). Also, a recent study found that maternal self-report attachment avoidance was related to lower warmth and overall quality and higher relationship hostility between adolescents and their parents (Jones & Cassidy, 2014). Similarly, research on parents with adult-age children showed that parental self-report attachment security was related to higher self-report and child-report of relational satisfaction (La Valley & Guerrero, 2012). Fostering well-functioning parent-child relationships and managing parenting tasks may require a great amount mental and emotional resources. Therefore, parents' secure romantic relationships may protect them from being overwhelmed by their own attachment needs, allowing them to be more sensitive and responsive to their children's needs. In contrast, parents with insecure romantic relationships may struggle with managing their own relationship issues with partners (e.g., conflict), reducing their capability of fostering high quality relationships with their children (Millings et al., 2012; Rholes, Simpson, & Friedman, 2006).

Some research has also examined the link between parental self-report attachment styles and their conflict resolution skills in a parent-child context. Specifically, research has found that parents (of adolescent or adult children) higher on avoidance and anxiety attachment were more likely to use maladaptive conflict resolution strategies when dealing with parent-child conflict (Feeney, 2006; García-Ruiz, Rodrigo, Hernández-Cabrera, Máiquez, & Deković, 2013; La Valley & Guerrero, 2012). A study also showed that with mothers who were high in self-report attachment avoidance, adolescents displayed less secure base use behaviors during an observed conflict discussion task (Jones & Cassidy, 2014). Based on past literature, we hypothesized that parents' avoidance and anxiety would be related to their own report of lower closeness and higher discord. Similarly, we also hypothesized that parents' avoidance and anxiety would be related to their adolescents' reports of lower closeness and higher discord.

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