



# Maternal nurturance predicts decreases in attachment avoidance in emerging adulthood <sup>☆</sup>



William J. Chopik <sup>a,\*</sup>, Amy C. Moors <sup>a,b</sup>, Robin S. Edelstein <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Women's Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, United States

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## ABSTRACT

One of the central tenets of attachment theory is that experiences in early childhood influence people's approach to social relationships throughout the lifespan. We examined the influence of caregiver nurturance on the development of attachment orientation from adolescence to emerging adulthood in a sample of 103 individuals (50% female). Attachment anxiety decreased from age 14 to 18 and then increased from age 18 to 23; avoidance decreased from age 14 to 23. Higher caregiver nurturance at age 3 was associated with larger declines in avoidance from age 14 to 23. Our findings illustrate how early caregiving experiences continue to shape and influence children's personality development, nearly twenty years after these experiences occur.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the central tenets of attachment theory is that experiences in early childhood influence people's approach to social relationships throughout the lifespan (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Sensitive and nurturant caregiving is thought to promote children's sense of security, which is carried forward into adolescent and adult relationships (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Yet very few studies have examined prospective links between parenting styles and children's personality beyond the first few years of life. Further, it is unclear how attachment orientations change during emerging adulthood and whether early caregiving environments predict the nature of these changes. In the current study, we examined the influence of caregiver nurturance on the development of attachment orientations during emerging adulthood.

### 1.1. The development of attachment orientation in emerging adulthood

Attachment theory postulates that differences in the quality of early caregiving experiences lead to individual differences in

parent–infant attachment (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). According to this framework, secure infants tend to have nurturant caregivers who are responsive and attentive to their needs; insecure (anxious and avoidant) infants tend to have caregivers who are less nurturant and less responsive to their needs. Hazan and Shaver (1987) extended these classifications to adult attachment orientations that conceptually map onto differences found among infants (secure, anxious, avoidant). Attachment anxiety reflects concern over the availability of close others; attachment avoidance reflects discomfort with closeness and intimacy. Individuals low in both anxiety and avoidance are generally considered secure. Indeed, secure attachment assessed in infancy is often related to better communication and conflict resolution skills in close relationships in adulthood (Roisman, Collins, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2005).

Since Hazan and Shaver's (1987) seminal article, adult attachment theory has become a dominant framework for understanding individual differences in cognition, emotion, and behavior in close relationships (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Relatively little is known, however, about lifespan developmental changes in attachment orientation, particularly during important life stages and transitions. Emerging adulthood, a period between adolescence and adulthood, may be particularly relevant for understanding changes in attachment because it is a period of great change, both physically and psychologically (Arnett, 2000). During this time period, people begin to explore their identities and become increasingly independent from their primary caregivers (Erikson, 1968). Emerging adulthood is also important from an attachment perspective because emerging adults begin to shift their attachment needs

<sup>☆</sup> The data employed in this study derive from a 30-year longitudinal study begun with 128 3-year-old girls and boys, planned and conducted by Jack and Jeanne H. Block, involving a sequence of 9 independent assessments based on personality and cognitive Life, Observational, Test, and Self-report (LOTS) measures. The first author was supported by a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship.

\* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, 530 Church Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, United States. Fax: +1 (734) 647 9440.

E-mail address: [chopik@umich.edu](mailto:chopik@umich.edu) (W.J. Chopik).

from their parents to their peers and romantic partners (Fraley & Davis, 1997). According to Bowlby's (1969/1982) original theoretical claims, attachment orientations serve as “working models” for how people relate to one another and are malleable over time and across situations. Thus, emerging adults are likely to encounter many new experiences and their attachment orientation may serve as an important guide for making sense of these new situations.

How do attachment orientations change during emerging adulthood? Cross-sectional data suggest meaningful differences in attachment orientation even within this relatively small time-frame: In large cross-sectional samples of over 86,000 adults, we found that attachment anxiety and avoidance generally decreased from age 19–22 before increasing around age 23 (see Chopik & Edelstein, *in press*; Chopik, Edelstein, & Fraley, 2013). Thus, one might expect a curvilinear relationship between age and attachment orientation (with anxiety and avoidance initially decreasing before increasing again) during emerging adulthood. Although avoidance and anxiety may show curvilinear change with age, it is also plausible that avoidance would consistently decline during this time period. For instance, among college-aged students, avoidant individuals are less likely to enter a committed relationship—above and beyond the effects of physical attractiveness, desire to start a committed relationship, and prior dating experience (Schindler, Fagundes, & Murdock, 2010). Anxiety is unrelated to emerging adults' relationship initiation, suggesting that avoidance may be particularly important during this time period. We hypothesized that avoidance would decline from adolescence through emerging adulthood (14–23); these changes could result from individuation processes and/or the shifting of attachment needs and networks from parents to peers during early adulthood (Fraley & Davis, 1997). Also, similar normative changes in personality are often thought to be beneficial in the formation and maintenance of close relationships in early adulthood (Roberts, Wood, & Smith, 2005).

### 1.2. Associations between caregiver nurturance in childhood and adult attachment orientation

Although early caregiving is thought to be central to the development of attachment bonds, the few studies examining the development of attachment orientation in adulthood have not examined the influence of caregiving environments over time (Brenning, Soenens, Braet, & Beyers, 2013; Davila, Burge, & Hammen, 1997; Davila, Karney, & Bradbury, 1999; Hamilton, 2000; Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994; Scharfe & Cole, 2006; Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000; Zhang & Labouvie-Vief, 2004). The few notable exceptions suggest that early caregiving quality can have enduring effects on later behavior. For example, in a 20-year longitudinal study, Zayas, Mischel, Shoda, and Aber (2011) found that maternal sensitivity at 18 months was negatively related to anxiety and avoidance at age 22. In another study, observer ratings of caregiver supportiveness, enthusiasm, and patience at 24 months of age were positively associated with children's conflict resolution skills at age 16 and negatively associated with hostility towards a partner during a conflict-resolution task at age 20–21 (Oriña et al., 2011). In a study of over 700 families, Fraley, Roisman, Booth-LaForce, Owen, and Holland (2013) found that maternal sensitivity throughout childhood (measured repeatedly from the time the child was 6 months old to age 15) predicted lower avoidance at age 18. Several other studies examining the effects of parenting styles on attachment orientation reach similar conclusions, albeit among young children and adolescents (Beijersbergen, Juffer, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van Ijzendoorn, 2012; Raby, Cicchetti, Carlson, Egeland, & Collins, 2013; Raby et al., 2012; Roisman et al., 2005; Shulman, Elicker, & Sroufe, 1994).

Although these studies provide important evidence for links between early caregiving and attachment development later in life, they have one important limitation. Specifically, previous research has generally relied on two assessment points: one of parenting in early childhood and one of attachment/commitment in adulthood (Brenning, Soenens, Braet, & Bal, 2012; Brenning, Soenens, Braet, & Bosmans, 2011; Fraley et al., 2013; Roisman et al., 2005; Salo, Jokela, Lehtimäki, & Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2011; Weinfield, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2000; Weinfield, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004; Zayas et al., 2011). Limited time points can obscure developmental trajectories that are assumed to give rise to the formation of adult attachment orientation (Fraley & Brumbaugh, 2004). Perhaps the influence of early caregiving emerges only after an extended period of time, when individuals begin to shift attention and resources to finding a primary partner (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005; Sroufe, Egeland, & Kreutzer, 1990). Or, perhaps caregiving in childhood is only influential to a certain point, before individuals begin to update older experiences with new interactions with peers and romantic partners (Kagan, 1996; Lewis, 1997). Alternatively, early caregiving experiences may have a static influence, such that their relative contribution may not change over time (Roisman & Fraley, 2012).

Sroufe et al. (1990) suggest that early experiences may not always predict development in early childhood, but “may again become manifest in certain contexts, in the face of further environmental change, or in the face of certain developmental issues” (p. 1364). Emerging adulthood can be considered a time of great environmental change that presents many developmental issues (e.g., finding a long term partner; Arnett, 2000). Thus, the influence of early caregiving experiences can be conceptualized as a latent phenomenon that emerges only during specific developmental contexts, such as emerging adulthood; as a result, early caregiving experiences may become increasingly influential in predicting adult attachment orientation during the onset of major relationship transitions during this time period. Consistent with Sroufe and colleagues' observation of latent developmental processes, attachment experiences may become more salient during particularly stressful transitions, perhaps exerting their influence more during this time period. In the current study, we hypothesized that individuals with more nurturant caregivers would become increasingly more secure (less anxious and avoidant) throughout emerging adulthood.

### 1.3. The current study

The current study examined the development of attachment orientation from adolescence (age 14) to emerging adulthood (ages 18 and 23). We also examined whether changes in attachment orientation were moderated by nurturant caregiving at age 3. The current sample is ideal for examining the enduring influence of caregiving practices on adult attachment orientation for several reasons. First, there are relatively few longitudinal studies of attachment orientation, especially those spanning more than a few years (Fraley, 2002). The current study spans the longest timeframe of existing longitudinal studies of attachment orientation, predicting trajectories in attachment as a function of caregiver styles nearly 20 years prior. Second, the current study includes four assessment points, one in childhood and three at ages 14, 18, and 23, with identical measures of attachment orientation. Multiple assessment points allow us to examine the *trajectory* of changes in attachment orientation as a function of early caregiving experiences. Further, with multiple assessments, we can also test whether early caregiving experiences have an emergent influence on adult personality, appearing during particularly challenging developmental periods (Sroufe, Coffino, & Carlson, 2010; Sroufe et al., 1990). Third, previous research relies heavily on self-reports

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