

# Myth-Busting Around Attachment Theory

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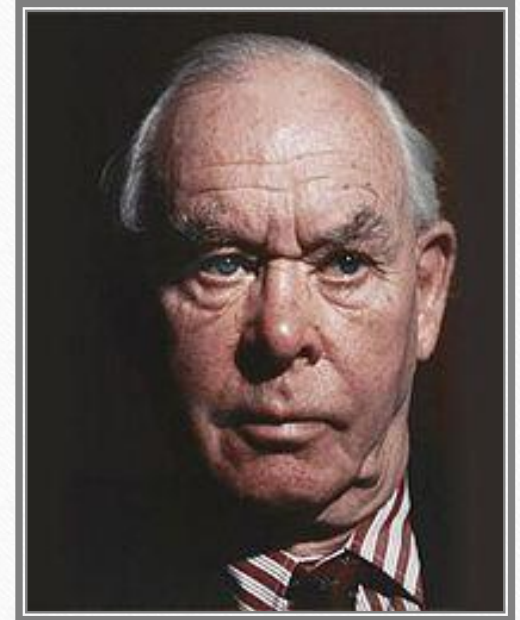
Or rather, some empirical challenges to commonly held  
interpretations of attachment theory....

Pasco Fearon

# Attachment Theory

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- Evolutionarily-rooted theory of the nature of a child's ties to caregivers
- An eclectic, hybrid, theory drawing on biology, cybernetics, ethology, psychoanalysis, developmental psychology, cognitive science
- Remarkably influential, having impacts well beyond its own core phenomena (field of developmental psychopathology, early child development research, intervention science, child care policy and practice)





# Testing the Theory

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## Some of attachment theory's strong claims:

- Attachment security-insecurity is caused entirely by the environment
- Attachment patterns, laid down in early life, are stable over time and transmitted across generations
- Attachment security is crucial for children's mental health

# Environmental Causes

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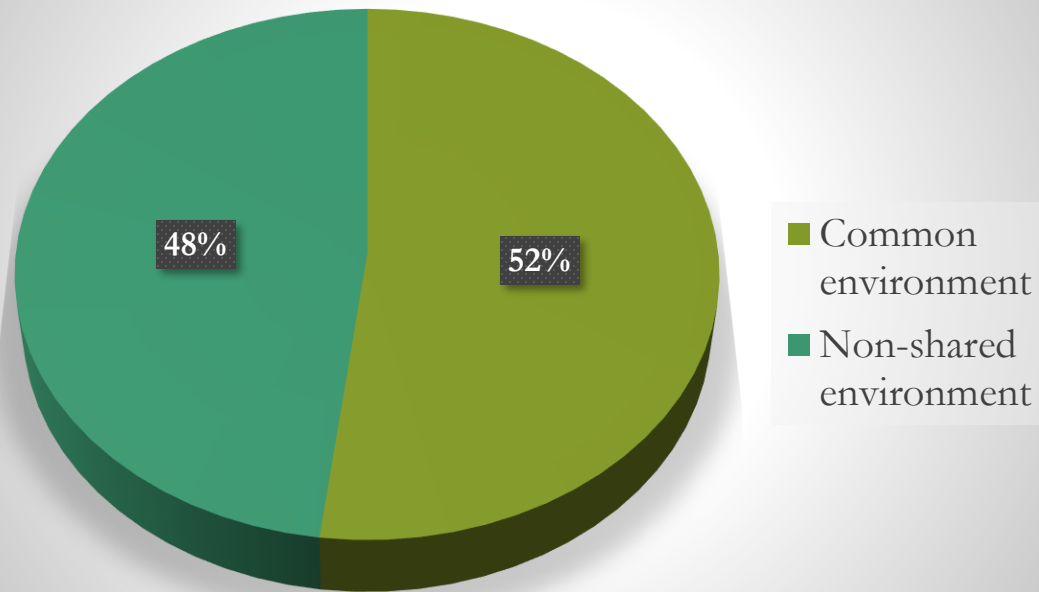
- Comparisons of MZ and DZ twins allows us to disentangle genetic influences from environmental ones
- Contemporary attachment theory makes the bold claim that ALL variation in attachment security is due to the environment
- How do twins behave in the Strange Situation?





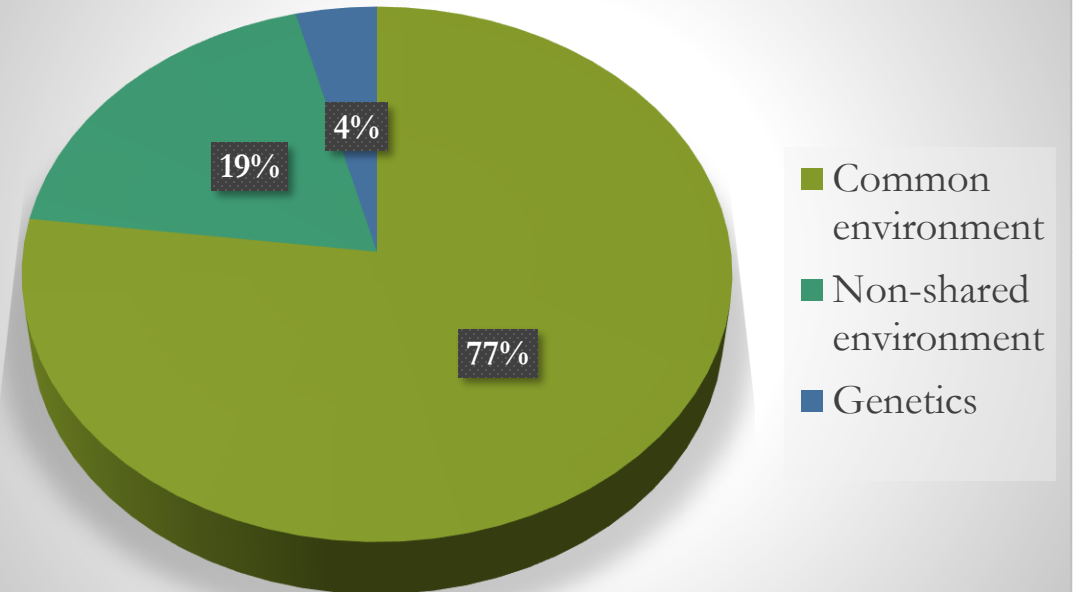
# Estimates of Genetic and Environmental Effects in Twin Studies

SSP Security



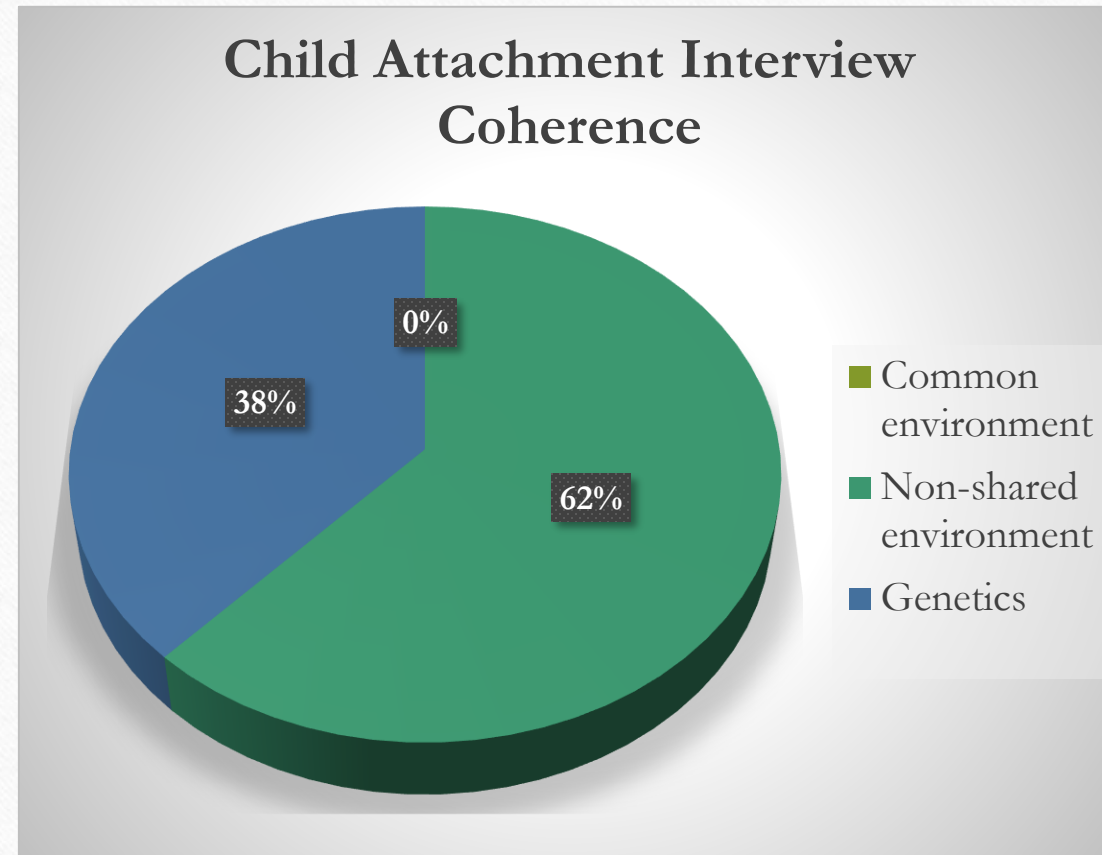
Bokhorst et al (2003), see also O'Connor & Croft, 2001

TAS-45 Security



Roisman & Fraley (2008)

# Genes and Environment in Adolescent Attachment



Fearon, Schmueli-Goetz, Viding, Fonagy & Plomin, 2014 551 Twin Pairs, Aged 15

# Conclusions

Attachment in infancy is not heritable, but in adolescence there is evidence it is

In infancy and adolescence, the non-shared environment is highly significant and poorly understood

What might explain the increased role of genetics in adolescent attachment?

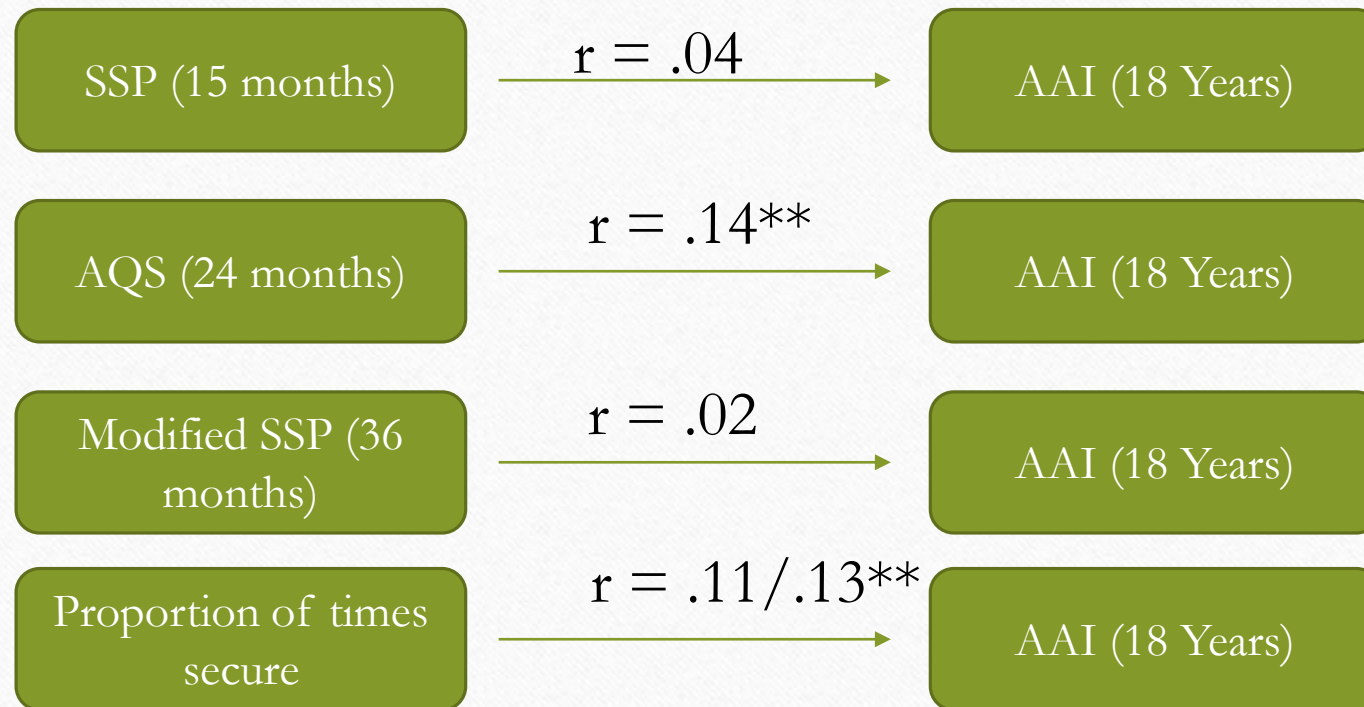
Developmental unfolding of genetic effects (rGE?)

Different underlying systems mediating attachment behaviour and representational coherence?

Developmental change or construct shift?



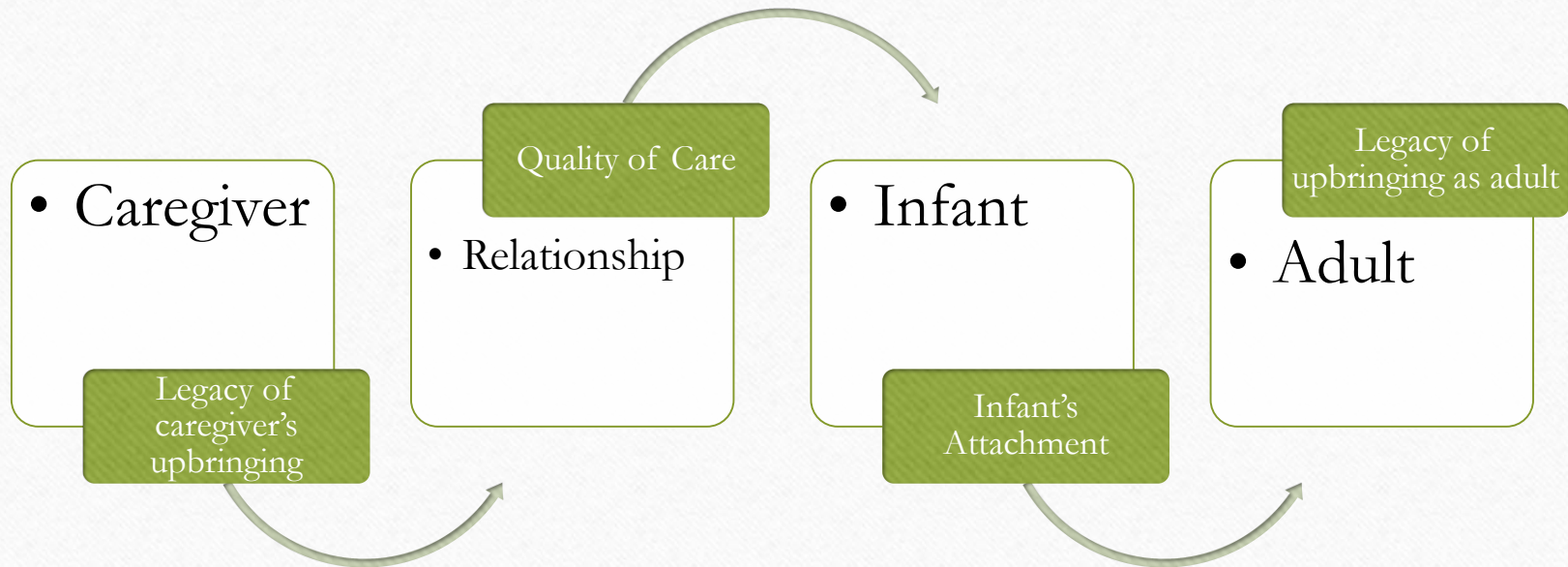
# Attachment Continuity



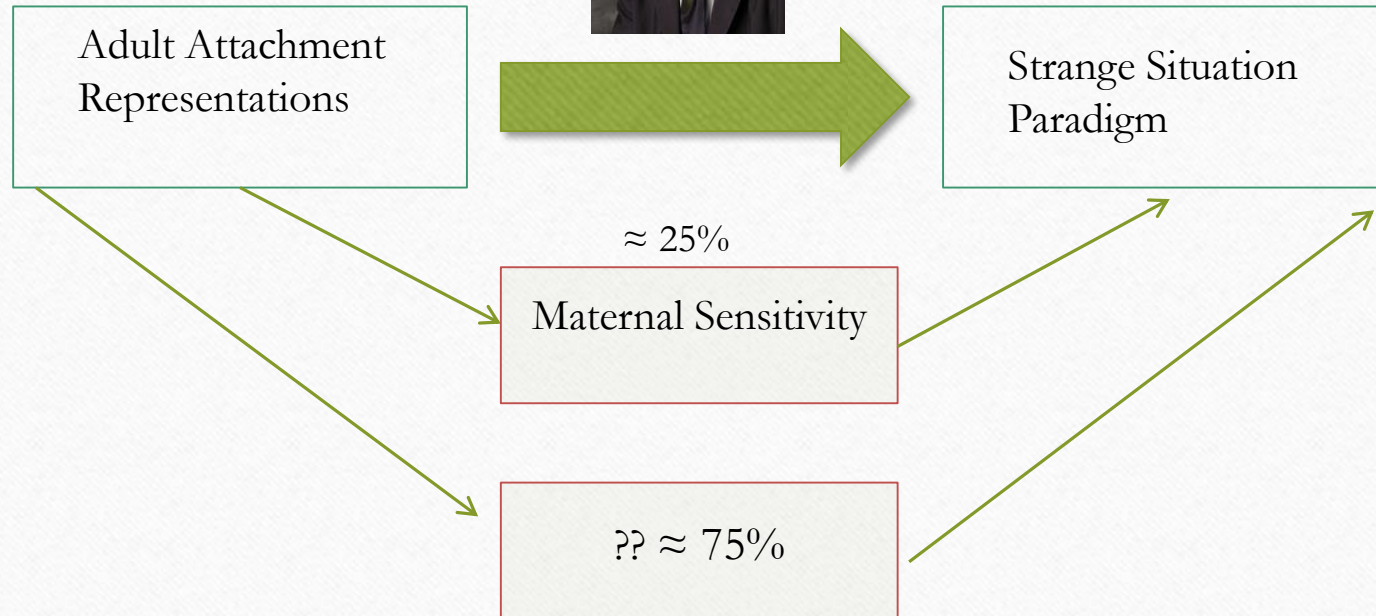


# Intergenerational transmission

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# Meta-analytic evidence



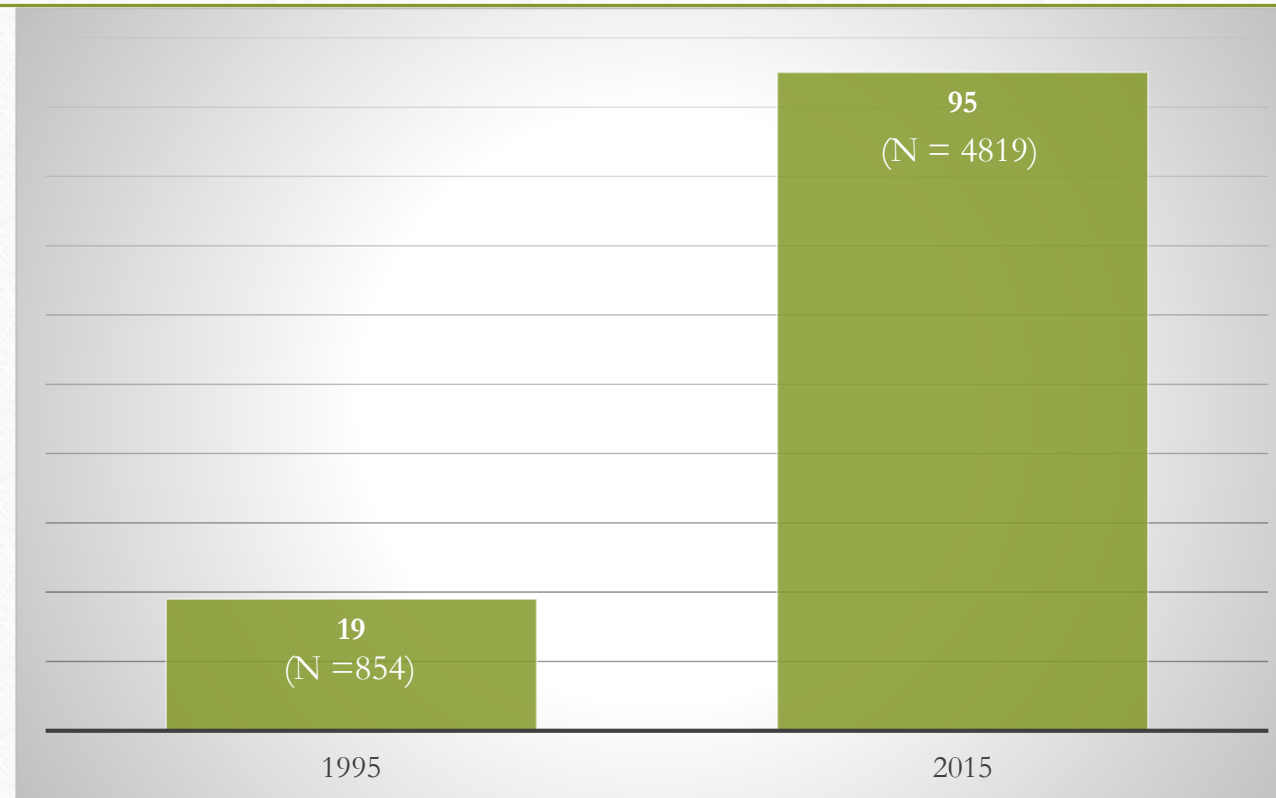


# New Meta-Analysis (2016)

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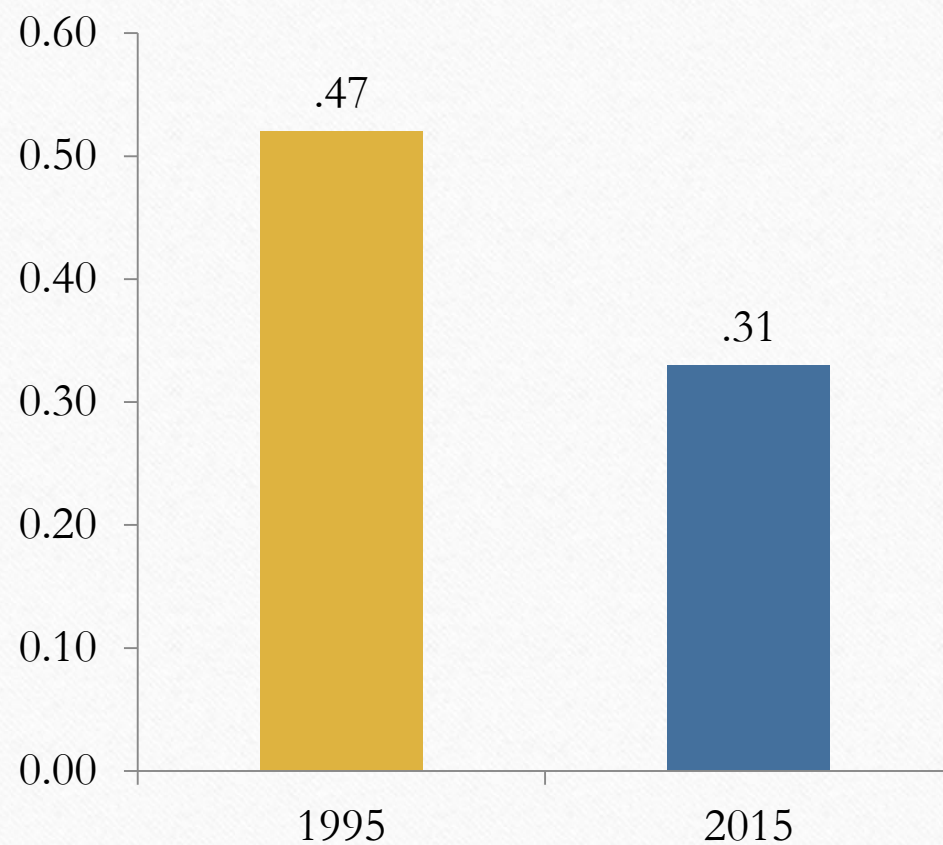
- Verhage, Schuengel, C., Madigan, S., Fearon, R., Oosterman, M., Cassibba, R., . . . van IJzendoorn, M. H. (2015). Narrowing the Transmission Gap: A Synthesis of Three Decades of Research on Intergenerational Transmission of Attachment. *Psychological Bulletin*, 142(4):337-366.

# Growth in Research on Transmission





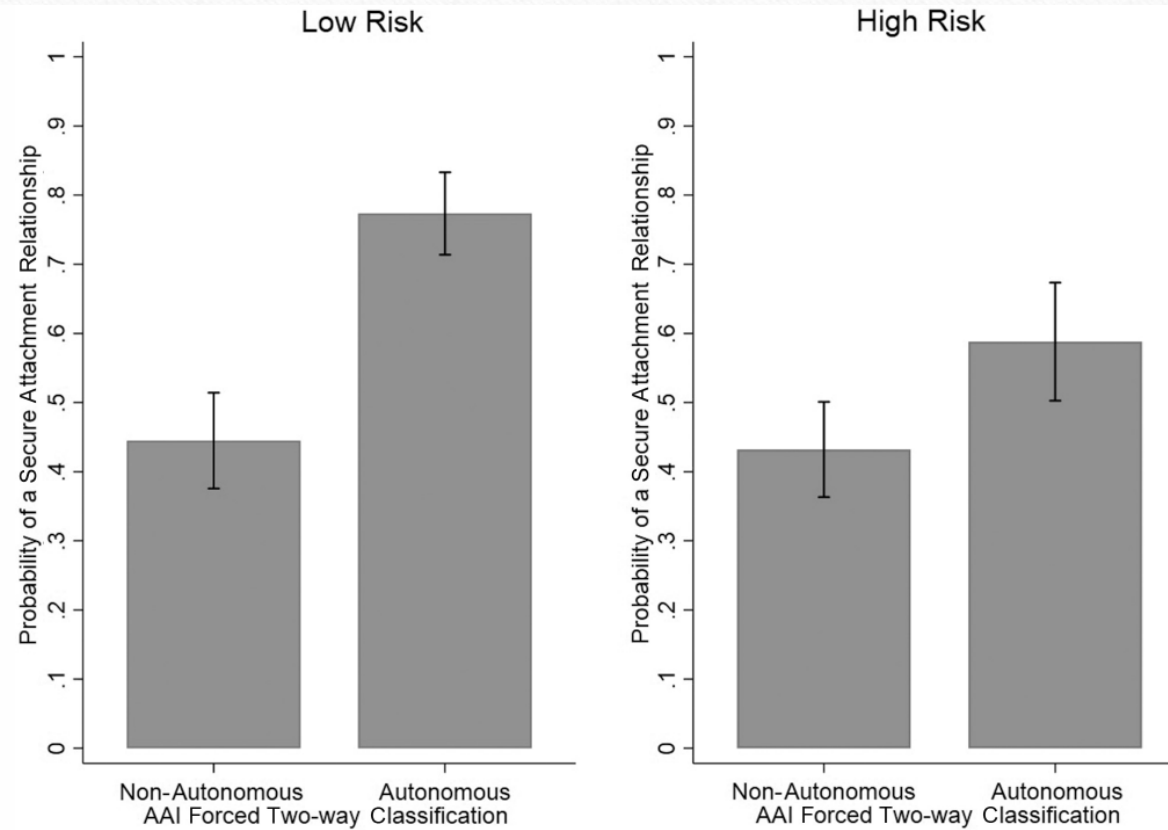
## Results: Autonomous AAI to Secure SSP



‘Forced classifications’  
 $k = 83, N = 4102$

Concordance = 78%

# Moderators



See Verhage et al., 2018 in Child Development



# Conclusion

Good evidence that infant attachment is predictable from measurements of the parents' narrative regarding their own early attachment experiences

Association is substantial weaker than previously thought

Some factors are associated with weaker intergenerational transmission, especially risk status

Limited research to evaluate whether the association is a causal one

# Attachment and Later Outcomes

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- Three recent meta-analyses aimed to summarize the overall evidence
- Meta-analysis 1: Children's Externalizing Problems
- Meta-analysis 2: Children's Internalizing Problems
- Meta-analysis 3: Children's Social Competence



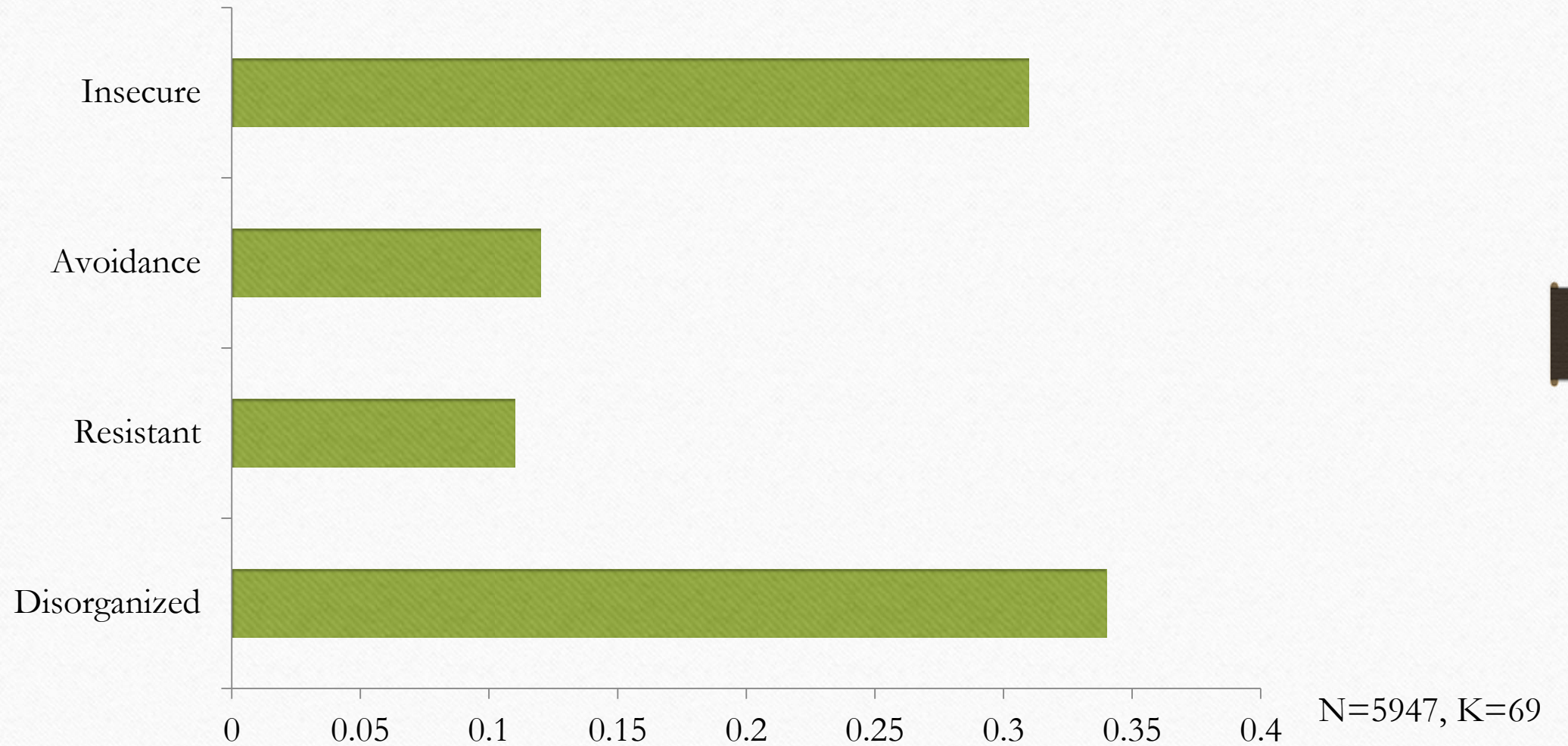
# Attachment and Externalizing Problems

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- Fearon, R., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., van IJzendoorn, M. H., Lapsley, A.-M., & Roisman, G. I. (2010). The significance of insecure attachment and disorganization in the development of children's externalizing behavior: A meta-analytic study. *Child Development*, 81(2), 435-456.



# Effect Sizes by Attachment Group





# Moderators

Age	Measure	Clinical Population	Gender
Stronger associations in older children	Non-SSP measures (AQS, Cassidy & Marvin) stronger	Clinical groups stronger	Association stronger in males



**Developmental  
Effects**

**Measurement  
Issues**

**Level of Risk**



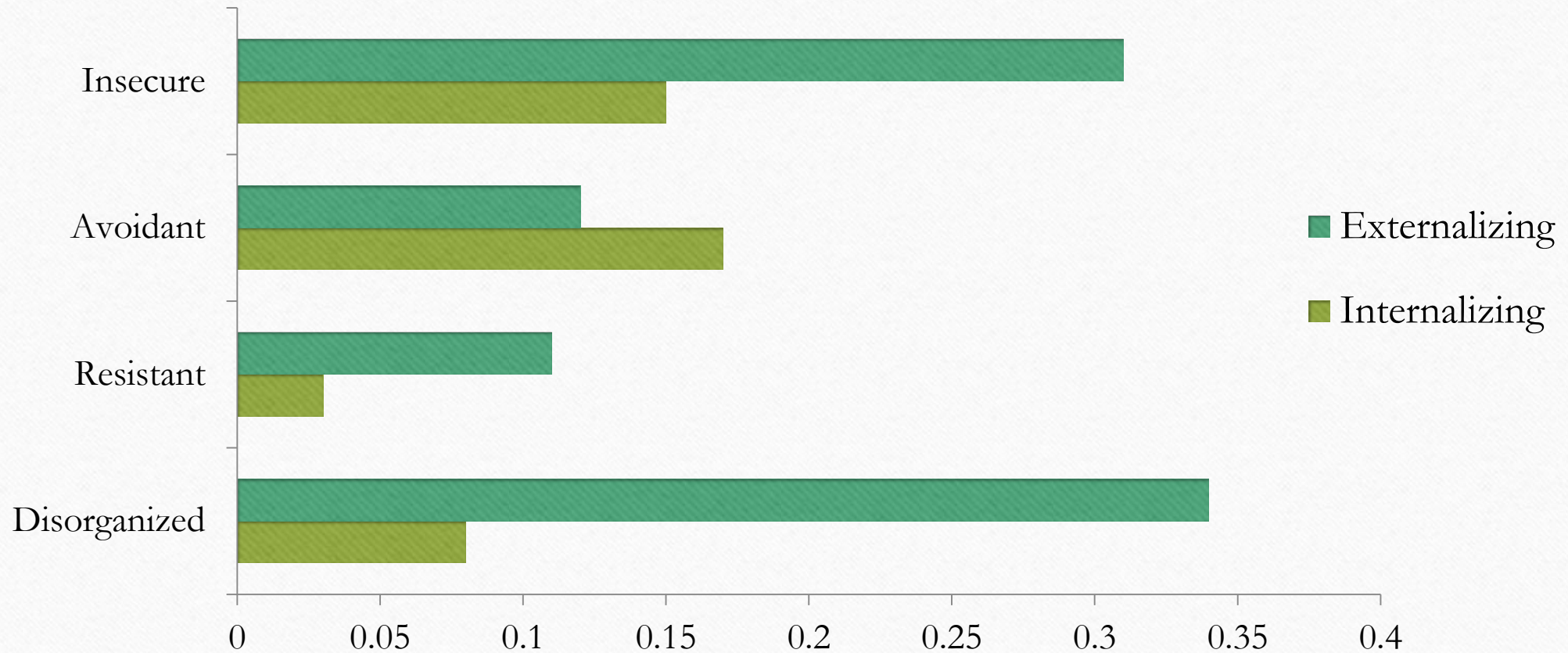
# Attachment and Internalizing Problems

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- Groh, A. M., Roisman, G. I., van IJzendoorn, M. H., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., & Fearon, R. (2012). The significance of insecure and disorganized attachment for children's internalizing symptoms: A meta-analytic study. *Child Development*, 83(2), 591-610.



# Internalizing vs. Externalizing





# Attachment and Social Competence

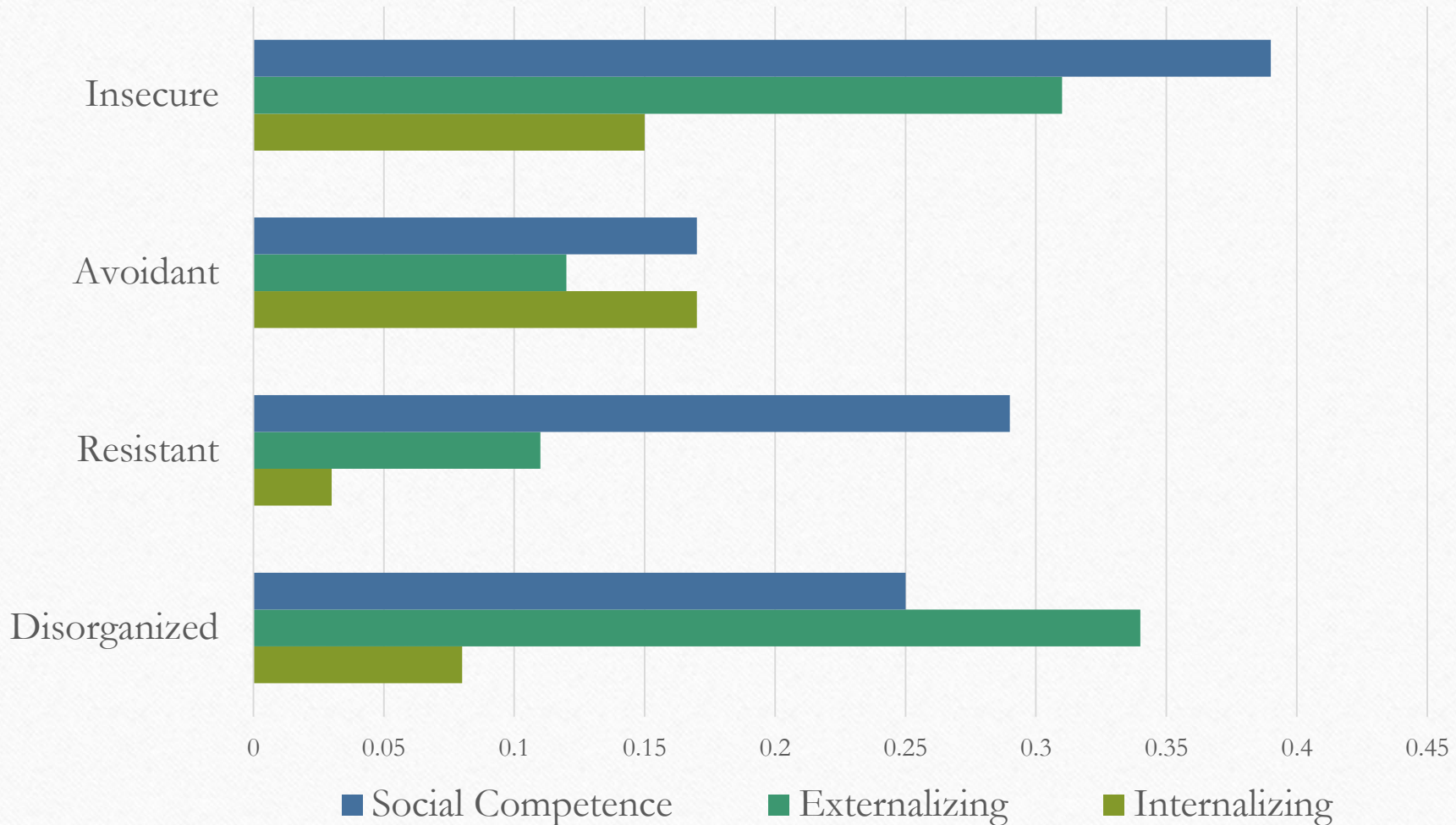
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- Groh, A. M., Fearon, R. P., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., Van IJzendoorn, M. H., Steele, R. D., & Roisman, G. I. (2014). The significance of attachment security for children's social competence with peers: a meta-analytic study. *Attachment & human development*, 16(2), 103-136.





# Group Effect Sizes



# Conclusions

Effects of attachment vary by domain

Stronger effects of externalizing problems and social competence than internalizing problems

Broader effects (across more insecure sub-groups) for social competence

Several moderators indicated (especially gender, age, measurement) needing more investigation

Effects are not large – insecure and disorganized attachments are NOT determinative of poor outcomes



So....

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