Myth-Busting Around Attachment Theory

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

Pasco Fearon
Attachment Theory

• 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

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

- 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
- Common environment: 52%
- Non-shared environment: 48%

TAS-45 Security
- Common environment: 77%
- Non-shared environment: 19%
- Genetics: 4%

Bokhorst et al (2003), see also O’Connor & Croft, 2001
Roisman & Fraley (2008)
Genes and Environment in Adolescent Attachment

Child Attachment Interview
Coherence

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

- SSP (15 months) → AAI (18 Years) \( r = .04 \)
- AQS (24 months) → AAI (18 Years) \( r = .14^{**} \)
- Modified SSP (36 months) → AAI (18 Years) \( r = .02 \)
- Proportion of times secure → AAI (18 Years) \( r = .11/.13^{**} \)
Intergenerational transmission

- Caregiver
  - Legacy of caregiver’s upbringing
- Quality of Care
  - Relationship
- Infant
  - Infant’s Attachment
- Adult
  - Legacy of upbringing as adult
Meta-analytic evidence

Adult Attachment Representations

≈ 25%

Maternal Sensitivity

Strange Situation Paradigm

?? ≈ 75%
New Meta-Analysis (2016)

Growth in Research on Transmission

1995 (N = 854)  
2015 (N = 4819)
Results: Autonomous AAI to Secure SSP

‘Forced classifications’
$k = 83, N = 4102$
Concordance = 78%
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

- 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

Effect Sizes by Attachment Group

- Insecure
- Avoidance
- Resistant
- Disorganized

N=5947, K=69
## Moderators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Clinical Population</th>
<th>Gender</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stronger associations in older children</td>
<td>Non-SSP measures (AQS, Cassidy &amp; Marvin) stronger</td>
<td>Clinical groups stronger</td>
<td>Association stronger in males</td>
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### Developmental Effects

### Measurement Issues

### Level of Risk
Attachment and Internalizing Problems

Internalizing vs. Externalizing

- Insecure
- Avoidant
- Resistant
- Disorganized

- Externalizing
- Internalizing
Attachment and Social Competence

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....