Patterns of Attachments across the Lifespan

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Abstract

The attachment relationship is a critical bond between infant and caregiver that, when secure, facilitates physical and psychological well-being. Cutting-edge research integrating attachment theory with cognitive theories of event representations indicates that both generalized event representations, or scripts, and specific autobiographical narratives provide continuity from implicit to explicit representations of attachment across development. Script-like attachment representations are related to implicit behavioral measures in infancy, as well as to adult narrative measures of attachment, the emerging life story, and intimate partner behaviors, providing continuity across development in attachment representations and behaviors. Explicit attachment representations are at least partly developed within parentally guided narrative interactions in which mothers help their preschool children develop coherent and emotionally regulated representations of their past experiences. These representations are related to developing self-concept and emotion-regulation. Narrative representations of attachment extend beyond personal experience to include intergenerational narratives of the familial past, thus facilitating the intergenerational transmission of attachment. Additional longitudinal research is needed to flesh out these exciting new integrations of attachment theory and cognitive psychology.

INTRODUCTION

The attachment relationship is a critical bond between infant and caregiver that, when secure, facilitates physical and psychological well-beings. It begins for the infant as an implicit behavioral response system based on generalized expectations gleaned from parental responsiveness to the infants' needs. With development, it expands into an explicit representation, what Bowlby (1969) termed the "internal working model" (IWM), which provides a framework for understanding self and relationships. The IWM is postulated to underlie the intergenerational transmission of attachment, as individuals themselves become parents, thus facilitating continuity both across individual development and generations. Initially,

the IWM was theoretically underspecified. Recent cognitive research on event representations has provided theoretical fodder for specifying and testing how attachment is cognitively represented. Specifically, research examining both generalized event representations (scripts) and specific event representations (autobiographical narratives) has demonstrated that implicit attachment representations in infancy are related to the individual's developing explicit event representations about attachment-related experiences. These representations include attachment scripts, the life story, and socially constructed narrative representations of both personal and intergenerational experiences. Importantly, script and narrative representations of attachment have also been shown to be related to attachment relevant behaviors, including developing emotion regulation, developing self-concept, and intimate partner behaviors. Thus, cognitive approaches to attachment representations have proved to be generative, and have provided a mechanism for understanding how early implicit experiences develop into explicit representations that allow for continuity of representations and behaviors across the lifespan, and, indeed, across generations.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

ATTACHMENT STATUS IN INFANCY

Substantial research has examined the attachment system in infancy (see Cassidy & Shaver, 1999, for a review), usually through the strange situation paradigm that assesses infants' use of their caregiver for comfort/support upon reunion following separation. Sensitive and responsive caregivers have securely attached infants, evidenced as seeking and experiencing comfort from a caregiver following separation, which facilitates a sense of self as valuable, others as trustworthy and the world as safe. Less-sensitive and responsive caregivers have infants who display an insecure pattern of attachment. Insecure attachment can be further characterized as resistant, avoidant, or disorganized, but generally leads to a sense of self as unworthy, others as untrustworthy, and the world as a dangerous place where needs may not be met. Early attachment status is theoretically postulated to set the stage for attachment relationships and behavior across development. More securely attached individuals evidence higher sense of self-worth, are better able to regulate aversive emotional experiences, and display more positive relationships with others, compared to insecurely attached individuals.

ATTACHMENT AND EVENT REPRESENTATIONS

Recent research has expanded attachment representations beyond infancy and begun to examine how the development of explicit attachment

representations continues to influence individuals' perception of their social worlds. Because recent reviews have focused on the biological bases of attachment behavior (Feldman, 2012) and the relations between attachment status and social perception (Dykas & Cassidy, 2011), we do not review that research here. Rather, we focus on emerging relations between attachment and representations of past experiences, both generalized script representations and specific autobiographical narrative representations. We show that scripts and narratives are a central part of explicit attachment representations across development. Indeed, the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), a widely used method to assess adult representations of attachment relationships (Main, Hesse, & Kaplan, 2005), focuses on adults' abilities to narrate coherent childhood attachment experiences. Thus, scripts and narratives provide mechanisms through which early implicit models of attachment become explicit representations that provide developmental continuity of attachment behaviors.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

ATTACHMENT SCRIPTS

As behavioral expectations of caregiving become more explicit, they form accessible generalized representations of attachment referred to as the secure base script. Scripts are generalized event representations that provide a schematic representation of what usually happens, including actions, actors and objects, organized into coherent spatial-temporal frames (Nelson & Greundel, 1979). Waters and Waters (2006) described the secure base script as follows: child and mother are constructively engaged in the environment, something disrupts this engagement, there is a bid for help/support, the bid is detected, help/support is offered, the help is accepted and effectively resolves the disruption, and constructive engagement with the environment returns. A variety of measures have been developed to assess the secure base script both in the lab (Waters & Waters, 2006) and from the AAI (Waters, in press). Secure base scripts provide an explicit representation of the world as safe, caregivers as accessible and trustworthy, and the self as worthy of care. In this way, scripts form the basis of the child's emerging IWM of self in relationships in the world that provides a sense of security and trust, or lack thereof. As enduring cognitive representations, scripts influence a wide range of cognitive processes central to attachment behavior including attention, memory, social cognition, and decision making. Importantly, recent research has found that script-like attachment representations in adulthood are related to infant attachment behavior measured twenty years prior, demonstrating excellent construct validity for the script assessment

measure, as well as attesting to the continuity of implicit and explicit attachment representations across development (Waters, in press).

Maternal Reminiscing Style

Importantly, children's developing representations of past experiences are not constructed in isolation, but are created within narrative social interactions in which parents help children structure their memories in particular ways (see Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006, for a review). Autobiographical narratives move beyond a simple chronology of events, to include information about the "internal landscape of consciousness," the thoughts and feelings, motivations and intentions, of self and other, to weave a tapestry of human understanding. Thus, in addition to generalized event representations, the IWM also includes memories of specific autobiographical events that are, at least partly, based on explicit socially constructed narratives of the past that help children organize and understand their experiences. Just as there are individual differences in maternal caregiving behavior that leads to individual differences in the security of children's implicit IWMs, there are individual differences in maternal narrative style that lead to individual differences in children's developing explicit autobiographical narratives. Some mothers engage in reminiscing about shared past experiences with their children in more elaborative ways, providing rich, coherent, and detailed accounts of what happened, as well as providing more coherent evaluative frames for understanding these experiences. Especially when discussing negative emotional events, more highly elaborative mothers help their young children to better understand how and why difficult experiences happen and how best to resolve these experiences (see Fivush, 2007, for a review).

Bretherton (1990) proposed that sensitive and responsive maternal reminiscing style, which helps the child construct a coherent sense of his or her past self, is an important mechanism in transitioning from implicit to explicit working models of attachment. As predicted, more elaborative emotionally expressive maternal reminiscing style is related to attachment security (Fivush *et al.*, 2006). Both maternal and infant attachment security is related to a more elaborative maternal reminiscing style during the preschool years, and maternal reminiscing style during the preschool years is related to attachment status as children enter middle childhood. In terms of behaviors, more elaborative maternal reminiscing style during preschool predicts children's more coherent sense of self and better emotion regulation through middle childhood (see Fivush, 2007, for a review). This pattern supports the theoretical proposition that attachment representations, which are related to self-concept and emotion regulation, are partly mediated through

the explicit narrative representations of past experiences constructed in mother–child reminiscing.

ATTACHMENT AND THE LIFE STORY

As children develop into adolescents they continue to reflect on their past experiences and begin to develop a representation of their life known as a *life story* (McAdams, 1993). The life story contains individuals' understanding of who they are, how they came to be that way, and what critical events shaped their lives. T. Waters (under review) argued that IWMs and script-like attachment representations continue to influence adolescent representations of self via the life story. More specifically, because a script-like attachment representation provides a model of safety, security, and self-worth, individuals with more secure base representations should construct more positive and emotionally regulated life narratives. In fact, individuals who score high on a measure of script-like attachment representation told life stories with more redemption themes (bad things work out in the end), and fewer contamination themes (good things go from bad to worse), than did individuals with lower scores. This suggests that the form and meaning of our life story is related to, and may even have its roots in, attachment relationships and our representations of early attachment experience.

ATTACHMENT AND INTIMATE PARTNER BEHAVIOR

Attachment representations are theoretically related to positive relationships throughout development. In the first study to directly examine relations between script-like attachment representations and intimate partner behavior, T. Waters, Brockmeyer, and Crowell (2013) found that individuals who score high on a measure of script-like attachment representation displayed more care seeking and caregiving behaviors during lab-based interactions with their intimate partner, compared to individuals with lower scores. These findings suggest that explicit attachment representations are related to, and may underlie, real-world relationship behaviors.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF ATTACHMENT

A critical theoretical postulate of attachment theory, which has received some empirical support, is that attachment behaviors are transmitted intergenerationally through parental behavior (Main *et al.*, 2005). Given the theoretical framework developed here, we further argue that attachment may be transmitted intergenerationally through narrative representations shared within parent–child interactions. Research on maternal reminiscing style suggests

one avenue by which maternal attachment representations are transmitted to their children through more elaborated and coherent reminiscing about the personal past. An intriguing possibility is that attachment representations are also transmitted through intergenerational stories, stories parents tell their children about their own childhood experiences. Parents who tell more coherent narratives of their childhood (as is also assessed in the AAI) would be transmitting more coherent representations of attachment, and this would be manifested in the child's intergenerational narratives about the parent. In the first study to examine this, adolescents who told more coherent and more emotionally expressive stories about their mothers' (but not their fathers') childhood scored higher on a measure of script-like attachment representations (Zaman & Fivush, 2013). This intriguing finding suggests that IWMs may move beyond personal experiences, to include representations of intergenerational experiences in ways that influence the individuals' attachment status, and thus narrative representations may provide a mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of attachment.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The integration of attachment theory with cognitive psychology has yielded a generative set of hypotheses and empirical findings, which indicate that:

- IWMs of attachment are composed of both generalized script and specific autobiographical narrative representations that provide the lens through which personal experiences and relationships are understood.
- Children's representations of their past experiences as coherent and emotionally regulated develops within social narrative interactions in which mothers help children structure more elaborated and coherent personal narratives.
- Explicit representations of attachment, especially attachment scripts, underlie emergent themes in individuals' life stories.
- Attachment is transmitted intergenerationally, at least partly, through parental narratives of childhood experiences that provide adolescents with models and frameworks for understanding their own identity.

Empirical relations between attachment and event representations characterize a broader impetus in psychology to integrate cognitive and socioemotional approaches to understanding developmental processes, and provides a rich ground for generating further research. Among the most critical research moving forward: More longitudinal research linking early implicit attachment measures to emerging explicit representations is critical. Several large-scale longitudinal datasets are becoming available that

will allow investigation of these issues across development from infancy through early adulthood. Several of these databases include early childhood data on maternal reminiscing style, as well as emotional regulation and self-concept, and thus statistical models will allow sophisticated analysis of unique variance predicted by theoretically postulated variables.

In order to expand construct validity, and further integrate socioemotional and cognitive approaches, studies should include multiple measures of both attachment and event representations. In addition to the strange situation, which is the gold standard for infant attachment status, new measures include Q-sorts, as well as attachment scripts as defined here. New coding of the AAI using cognitive constructs is also critical, as well as developing new measures for attachment in the transition to adolescence. Autobiographical representations should be assessed through personal narratives, life stories, and narrative interactions with attachment figures.

Extending relations between attachment and event representations across the lifespan is critical, as individuals transition into parenting themselves, as well as aging into caregivers of their own parents and/or their spouse. Using an attachment framework opens new ways of understanding issues of aging and coping with end of life issues (Chen *et al.*, 2013).

Individuals who experience inconsistent, rejecting, or neglecting care do not develop the secure base script. What kinds of scripts take the place of the secure base script in the IWMs of insecurely attached individuals is an important future direction with tremendous potential for clinical intervention (see T. Waters, in press, for a discussion). The universality, frequency, and developmental antecedents of these alternate scripts are still largely unknown.

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Robyn Fivush is the Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Developmental Psychology at Emory University, where she has been on the faculty since 1984. She received her PhD from the Graduate Center of The City University of New York in 1983 and was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Human Information Processing, University of California at San Diego from 1983 to 1984. She is associated faculty with the Department of Women's Studies and a Senior Fellow in the Center for the Study of Law and Religion. Her research focuses on early memory with an emphasis on the social construction of autobiographical memory and the relations among memory, narrative, identity, trauma, and coping. She has published over 150 books, book chapters, and

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Theodore E. A. Waters recently completed his dissertation in psychology at Emory University studying with Dr. Robyn Fivush. His research interests focus largely on representations of early experience and their influence on autobiographical memory and behavior. He has developed several coding schemes for narrative data and lab-based procedures to assess script-like attachment representations and published several articles and chapters discussing these issues including T. Waters (in press) and T. Waters, Brockmeyer, and Crowell (2013).

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