Patterns of Relating in Adolescence

Kenisha W. Gordon

Gordon, Kenisha W., is an Assistant Professor at Mississippi College. Her areas of interest include attachment, play therapy, and multicultural issues.

From a developmental perspective, attachment theory has served as an important framework in understanding relationships throughout the lifespan (Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, & Haggart, 2006). Attachment theory explains how individuals cope with conflict and assume various interpretations from the behaviors of others. From the experiences of early attachment relationships with a primary caregiver, the internal working model (IWM) becomes a mental representation of expectations and beliefs about the self in relation to others (Rholes & Simpson, 2004).

West and Sheldon-Keller (1994) suggest dimensions or patterns of the IWM are developed based on childhood experiences. These dimensions are an extension of attachment types (i.e., secure, avoidant, ambivalent, and disorganized) developed by Ainsworth et al. and Main and Solomon (as cited in West & Sheldon-Keller) and are typically identified in infancy and childhood. Development beyond childhood reflects a more complicated dynamic of relating, in which one’s response or behavior causes a response or behavior from another. In this way, patterns of relating become self-perpetuated and become part of the relationship (Bowlby, 1988). Although much of the research on attachment primarily focuses on parent-adult child relationships and adult romantic relationships (Snow, Sullivan, Martin, & Helm, 2004); there is less known about the continuity of attachment relationships between parents and adolescents (Buist, Dekovic, Meeus, & van Aken, 2002). This article will provide a contemporary review of literature of the patterns of relating, based on the Adult Scale of Parental Attachment (Snow et al., 2004), as it pertains to adolescents while they are in the care of parental figures.

Bowlby (1988) delineates that although nearly all children will form an attachment relationship with a significant figure, not all children will form a secure attachment. Secure attachment or consistent responsive caregiving, particularly in childhood, provides an individual with a sense of protection, trust, and comfort from others, while also viewing himself or herself as confident, supported, and worthy of being loved (Gomez & McLaren, 2007; Markiewicz et al., 2006; Wallace & May, 2005). Conversely, insecure attachment or inconsistent responsiveness from the caregiver establishes an internal sense of self as unworthy and creates mistrust in others.
The experiences created between the child and mother and the child and father, form a pattern of relating necessary for the child to discern which responses and behaviors are favorable or unfavorable according to each parent’s interactions with the child. Snow et al. (2004) identify these patterns as safe, dependent, parentified, fearful, and distant, as illustrated in their 106 item self-report instrument, the Adult Scale of Parental Attachment (ASPA). In developing the ASPA, Snow et al. indicate that other attachment instruments measure only attachment styles primarily based on how secure the individual feels within a current peer or romantic relationship as opposed to measuring current relationship experiences based on the individual’s relationship or attachment history. Below is a brief review regarding patterns of relating, as it pertains to the adolescent population.

**Patterns of Relating**

**Safe**

In times of distress, securely attached individuals exhibit confidence in the availability of his or her significant other (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005); therefore the individual feels capable of coping with certain types of stressors that may normally place an insecurely attached person on high alert (West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994). Snow et al. (2004) explain that “a child with a safe pattern of relating may have experienced confidence in the parent’s availability and support” (p. 9). Patterns of relating impact the way one evaluates himself or herself in times of distress. When examining the correlation among parental recall, attachment, and self-attacking, or self-reassurance tendencies, Irons, Gilbert, Baldwin, Baccus and Palmer (2006) reported that individuals who have a secure attachment and were able to recall their parents as warm and caring, were able to reassure themselves during stressful situations.

Bowlby (1988) expresses that resiliency lies in the varying levels of patterns of relating to others. As adolescents spend less time with parents, maintaining a mental representation of the relationship with a parent becomes particularly important. Supportive caregiving relationships provide adolescents with a sense of confidence and security; thereby increasing their competency in social interactions. In peer relationships, adolescents who maintain a secure parental attachment are less likely to use hostile intent when experiencing peer conflict or rejection (Benson, McWey, & Ross, 2006).

**Dependent**

Insecure attachment experiences place an individual at greater risk for exhibiting impulse control problems, aggression, and dependency (Simons, Paternite, & Shore, 2001). The person may experience feelings of helplessness and incompetence as a result of a consistent dependent pattern of relating (Snow et al., 2004). As parents or parental figures greatly contribute to patterns of relating, an overprotective parent may imply to the child that he or she is not capable of taking care of oneself, in which the child may evaluate the self as inadequate (Irons et al., 2006). In an effort to elicit a response from the caregiver, individuals with a dependent pattern of relating appear to be in constant distress due to a strong fear of the significant figure’s availability (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005).
The literature indicates a strong association between dependency and depressive symptoms (Dunkley, Blankstein, Zuroff, Lecce, & Hui, 2006). Two traits that have been identified as increasing one’s vulnerability for depression are the excessive need for love and the need for perfection or self-criticism. The differences between these traits appear when the dependent person experiences a failed relationship and when the self-criticizing person has failed to reach a goal (Whiffen, Aube, Thompson, & Campbell, 2000).

Isolating the construct of dependency, Bornstein (as cited in Bornstein & Cecero, 2000) proposes that dependency can be thought about in relation to four areas: motivational, cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The need of approval or support from others provides motivation. Cognitively, a dependent person may see themselves as powerless, while affectively becoming anxious about the possibility of performing independently. Submissive behaviors may be exhibited in order to decrease negative internal cues. Besser, Fleet, and Davis (2003) concur that the excessive preoccupation with other people’s approval and the need to keep them close is a major aspect of the dependent individual’s functioning.

Because maladaptive reliance on others is a functional aspect of the dependent person, researchers note that these characteristics contribute to personality disorder diagnoses. In a Harvard Mental Health Letter (2007), the authors indicate that dependent personality characteristics are often a precursor to histrionic personality disorder and separation anxiety. The authors further emphasize that the origins of dependency lie in the adolescent’s early attachment relationship with caregivers, such that overindulgence in caring for the child creates unrealistic expectations about the availability of others. This perception also significantly contributes to the inability to maintain healthy relationships and to effectively cope with rejection.

**Parentified**

Caregiving should be a natural element of childhood, in which the child learns to be responsive to the distress of someone else (Byng-Hall, 2002; Earley & Cushway, 2002). In a healthy attachment relationship, reciprocal caregiving is normal, although at times one person may be the sole caregiver. The relationship becomes unhealthy when the role of the caregiver is permanent or long-standing (West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994). Bowlby (1988) describes parentified relationships as inverted, explaining that a parent can consciously or unconsciously position his or her child to act as an attachment figure, either as a mate or as a parent (Earley & Cushway, 2002). In situations of parentification, the child prohibits the self from acknowledging his or her own attachment needs. With the exception of proximity, this pattern provides the child with a sense of physical closeness. However, such a burden interferes with the child’s development and sense of autonomy (Byng-Hall, 2002; West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994).

Jurkovic (1997) highlights two types of parentification, adaptive and destructive. He explains that adaptive parentification is often a supported role. In some cultures, it is expected that adolescents will provide some level of parental care. A distinction with this type of parentification is that the child does not lose his or her identity while providing care to a parent. Jurkovic goes further to delineate that destructive parentification is often developmentally inappropriate as it involves excessive emotional responsibility from the adolescent.
As the child transitions through adolescence, this person becomes a compulsive caregiver, looking after others, even in situations where it is not needed. Earley and Cushway (2002) suggest that patterns of parentification can be transmitted intergenerational, as the parent continues to place the child in the role of the caregiver to satisfy unfulfilled needs from his or her own childhood. Patterns of parentification also impede the individual in learning to appropriately cope with rejection (Jurkovic, 1997). Unfortunately, some characteristics seen in parentified individuals are guilt-driven feelings, self-blame, depression, suicidal ideations, excessive worry, behavior problems, and psychosomatic problems (Byng-Hall, 2002). Because behavior problems are seen as the immediate focus, destructive parentification often goes unnoticed (Bowlby, 1988; Byng-Hall, 2002). Jones and Well (as cited in Earley and Cushway, 2002) found that certain personality styles such as masochism, narcissism, and compulsivity serve as defense mechanisms of parentified individuals.

**Fearful**

Although situations and reasons vary, Wallace and May (2005) insist that parents either consciously or unconsciously teach adolescents to fear. Cassidy (1999) explains that fear is an important component of the attachment system for the purpose of survival and protection. The availability of an attachment figure is a key factor in the regulation of fear. In the cases of sustained fear created from an insecurely attached relationship, adolescents of rejecting parents learn to avoid expressing signs of distress (Bowlby, 1988). Byng-Hall (2002) suggests that adolescents, who seem anxious, often have a history of an approach/avoidant relationship with their parents. The adolescent is often confused, as the parent serves as a source of security but is also the source of fear. As the adolescent becomes an adult, this fearful pattern of relating is carried into other relationships to avoid experiencing further feelings of anxiety and anger (Bowlby, 1988). Individuals with such a pattern, often become involved in relationships in which maintaining physical closeness to another is the main focus, although a felt sense of safety is not necessarily a goal. Although there is an absence of felt sense of security, the fearfulness lies in the threat of losing the physical closeness to the person (West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994). Mikulincer and Shaver (2005) point out that while fearful individuals are hyper-vigilant to situations or events that are perceived to be threatening; he or she maintains an active memory of the attachment figure’s availability and unavailability. Bowlby (1988) points out that parents use threats, such as threats of abandonment, threats of committing suicide, or threats of no longer loving the child, as a method of maintaining control over the child. Often adolescents are confused and feel that they are the cause of their parent’s inconsistent patterns of availability, especially when paired with messages that promise support (Matsuoka et al., 2006).

**Distant**

Parental unresponsiveness serves to initiate patterns of distant relationship, which often contributes to the adolescent’s feelings of loneliness and feelings of being misunderstood (West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994). Parental stress or chronic loss can result in the inability to relate to the needs of the child or adolescent (West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994). Individuals, who feel unprotected or uncared for, quickly develop methods of self-protection (Shields & Cicchetti, 2001; Siegfried, 2007). An individual with a history
of rejecting relationships develops a negative view of others and, in doing so, learns not to trust or see others as providing a sense of security (Matsuoka et al., 2006). Fear of rejection becomes incorporated into the individual working model, creating a perception of a hostile world (Palmer, 2005).

Some researchers note that adolescent-parent attachment begins to weaken as adolescents seek independence (Gomez & McLaren, 2007). Randall (2001) implies that parents who are distant from their children via lack of supervision or neglect, significantly contribute to the likelihood that their child will engage in more risk-taking behaviors (i.e., truancy, adolescent drinking, precocious sexuality, and delinquency). Research indicates that children who are abused or neglected by their parents often become perpetrators using the same behaviors, which is evidenced via incidents of spousal and child abuse (Shields & Cicchetti, 2001).

By denying personal faults and attachment needs, adolescents make strong efforts to behave independently and maintain an emotional distance from others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). When examining the correlation among parental recall, attachment, and self-attacking or self-reassurance tendencies, Irons et al. (2006) found that individuals who recalled their parents as rejecting and hostile, reported experiencing self-hatred during stressful situations and reported depressive type symptoms. In their study to investigate adolescent attachment figures, Freeman and Brown (2001) found that adolescents who were classified as dismissing identified themselves as their primary attachment figure. West & Sheldon-Keller (1994) insist that, because a majority of individuals will have at least one person they can identify as an attachment figure, dismissive patterns of relating are rare. Rosenstein, Horowitz, Stiedl, and Oreston (as cited in West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994) explain that, as a means of intentionally avoiding the possibility of being involved in a close relationship, individuals who exhibit a distant pattern of relating are perceived by others as angry, hostile, and lacking a sense of empathy. Additionally, such individuals either do not acknowledge or place importance on childhood memories, especially painful experiences (Shields & Cicchetti, 2001).

Summary

As noted in the review of literature, patterns of relating (safe, dependent, parentified, fearful, and distant) in adolescence can influence the expectations and behaviors exhibited in future relationships. Currently the only study to examine patterns of relating in the adolescent population revealed separate and distinct patterns of relating to the mother and the father when compared to the sample population of the previous ASPA studies (Gordon, 2009). As the ASPA is continuing to be investigated (Dempster, 2008; Martin, 2007; Rayner, 2009; Yang, 2012;), with further research, it is hoped that counselors working with adolescents understand that although it may be painful for adolescents to review past attachments, it may also provide a path to explaining current aspects of the self and the self in relation to others (West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994).
References


*Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm*