

Measurement of adult attachment: The place of self-report and interview methodologies

DEBORAH JACOBVITZ, MELISSA CURRAN and
NAOMI MOLLER

TWO TRADITIONS AND THEIR RESEARCHES

John Bowlby's (1979) proposal that 'attachment behavior is held to characterize human beings from the cradle to the grave' (p. 129) has spawned a large body of research applying principles of attachment theory to adult love relationships. A central and commendable goal of Shaver and Mikulincer's target article was to provide a means of bridging the conceptual gap between two lines of research within the study of love relationships within adulthood – one using coded narratives to identify adults' attachment representations with respect to childhood experience and the other using brief self-report instruments to assess adults' styles of approaching romantic relationships. Shaver and Mikulincer have done an excellent job in elaborating the research on adult romantic attachment. It is notable, however, that they provided few direct comparisons of research findings using the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) and the romantic attachment questionnaires. Such comparisons would be important in bridging the areas and in understanding conceptual similarities and differences between these two measures. Thus, the focus of this commentary will be to compare the research findings from studies in the two traditions. As discussed below, the two different methodologies may lead to systematic differences in how individuals' attachment status is classified, specifically with regard to assessment of individuals who in the AAI would be classified as secure, preoccupied, dismissing, or unresolved. Such differences indicate that studies using the two methodologies may not be comparing like with like. Thus, we begin by clarifying some of the potentially critical differences in how the two assessment methodologies assess individuals' attachment status followed by a comparison of findings in the two research traditions.

To begin, as Shaver and Mikulincer discuss, the AAI assessment of adults' attachment representations and the self-report assessment of adult romantic attachment styles are both grounded in Bowlby's (1969, 1973, 1980) theory of attachment. The early versions of these assessments were inspired by Ainsworth and her colleagues' (1978) landmark discovery of three infant attachment patterns – secure, avoidant and resistant. The AAI and self-report attachment measures differ in the aspects of adults' representation of relationships that they assess. The AAI classification system assesses adults' representation of attachment relationships with respect to particular close relationships, i.e. their relationship with their mother and father during childhood

Correspondence to: Deborah Jacobvitz, University of Texas at Austin, Human Development and Family Sciences, 117 Gearing Hall, Austin, TX 78712, USA.

(George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996). The self-report measure of romantic attachment styles, on the other hand, has traditionally assessed adults' representation of romantic partners more generally. Moreover, the AAI classification coding system assesses *adults' unconscious processes for regulating emotion* during discussions of attachment-related experiences during childhood, such as separations from attachment figures and what happened when they were upset, sick, or hurt (Main & Goldwyn, 1998). Trained coders assign adults to attachment categories by analyzing *how* they talk about their relationships with their parents during childhood, not the content of their speech. Unlike the AAI, the self-report measures of attachment tap adults' *conscious appraisals* of themselves in romantic relationships. Adults endorse statements indicating their comfort with closeness to a romantic partner and their tendency to seek support from that partner (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). The association between these two aspects of adults' representations of relationships, one using the AAI and the other using the self-report instruments, is unclear. Shaver, Belsky and Brennan (2000) report modest relationships between the two types of assessments but other investigators find no relationship (Borman & Cole, 1993; Holtzworth-Monroe, Stuart, & Hutchinson, 1997). One question, then, is to what extent do the groups assessed on the two adult attachment measures overlap conceptually, given their link to the same infant attachment pattern.

Dismissing current state of mind and avoidant attachment styles

Adults who openly acknowledge relationship difficulties and disclose that they find it difficult to trust and rely on others are considered avoidant on the self-report measure. However, on the AAI, an adult's openness and awareness of relationship difficulties and comfort with disclosing his or her problems is often associated with placement in the secure, as opposed to the dismissing, category. Adults classified as dismissing on the AAI (parallel to those considered avoidant on the self-report measure), on the other hand, minimize the importance of negative experiences with their parents during childhood. The most common strategies these adults use to minimize the pain associated with unwanted treatment involve insisting on a lack of memory for early experiences and idealization of one or both parents (Main & Goldwyn, 1998). The presence of contradictory statements during the AAI is used to determine whether adults idealize their parents. For example, one father in our sample claimed his parents were wonderful and very loving but failed to provide evidence that this was so. He claimed to have little memory of his childhood, but one of the few experiences he recalled entailed an incident in which his father beat him uncontrollably for running a tractor into a tree. The issue, then, is whether dismissing adults, such as this father in our study, would openly acknowledge their own relationship difficulties on a self-report measure. His initial claims that his parents were very loving lead us to suspect he would classify himself as secure on a self-report measure.

Preoccupied current state of mind and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles

A similar question arises with respect to the preoccupied current state of mind on the AAI and the anxious-ambivalent attachment style on the self-report attachment measures. The anxious-ambivalent attachment style involves being uncomfortable without close relationships, worrying about being loved and valued, and finding that others are scared off because their desire for intimacy is so strong (Bartholomew &

Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). On the AAI, some adults classified as preoccupied appear to be overly involved and angrily caught up in their relationship with their parents during childhood. Others, however, are classified as preoccupied because they talk well beyond their conversational turn, often rambling onto irrelevant topics and losing track of the interview question. In addition, these adults cannot clearly describe their relationship with their parents during childhood; for example, they use nonsense words, vague phrasing, and confuse self-other pronouns, and so forth. The way these adults talk about their experiences during the interview indicates their preoccupation with their relationship with their parents during childhood; they do not mention that they are still overwhelmed by early negative experience and that these feelings are interfering with their discourse, thus making it difficult for them to communicate clearly what happened to them. The question, then, is the extent to which and in what ways adults classified as passively preoccupied on the AAI would recognize their relationship difficulties.

Unresolved with respect to loss and/or trauma and fearful attachment styles

The early versions of the two types of attachment measures consisted of three categories – secure, preoccupied (anxious on the self-report measure), and dismissing (avoidant on the self-report measure) – that correspond conceptually to the three primary infant attachment patterns. A fourth category was added later to each of the two attachment measures. The fourth category on the self-report assessment is termed ‘fearful’. Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991) define these adults as having ‘a sense of unworthiness (unlovability) combined with an expectation that others will be negatively disposed (untrustworthy and rejecting)’ (p. 227). They also suggest the possibility of a relation between the fearful style and the disorganized infant attachment pattern. Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991) note that Brennan, Shaver and Tobey (1991) found that fearful subjects tended to endorse both the avoidant and ambivalent statement options and that this is similar to the mix of ambivalence and avoidance that characterizes infants classified as disorganized using Ainsworth’s Strange Situation procedure. However, the fearful attachment style seems to differ qualitatively from the disorganized infant pattern. A mixture of avoidance and ambivalence is only one of the many behavioral indices of attachment disorganization during infancy. Infants are classified as disorganized if they show a disorientation to the present environment, such as freezing, stilling, slowed ‘underwater’ movements and expressions, disoriented wandering, confused and dazed expressions, mistimed movements, and anomalous postures (Main & Solomon, 1986). To date, there is no evidence that adults considered fearful on the adult romantic attachment styles measure enter into dissociated states or become disoriented to the present environment, nor have there been any empirical links between the fearful and disorganized category.

The unresolved attachment classification on the AAI is grounded in Bowlby’s (1980) ideas about attachment, loss and mourning and was inspired by Main and Solomon’s (1986) discovery of attachment disorganization and disorientation in infancy. Adults who enter into altered states of consciousness during discussions of loss and/or trauma are classified as ‘unresolved’ (Main & Goldwyn, 1998). For example, some adults classified as unresolved engage in irrational thinking when discussing loss or trauma (e.g. briefly making statements indicating that a parent who died 20 years ago is still alive in a real, not metaphysical, sense) and/or lose track of the discourse context completely (e.g. falling silent for 60 seconds in mid-sentence). Unresolved adults (vs. other

adults) are more likely to behave in frightening ways with their infants during the first year of life (Jacobvitz, Hazen, & Riggs, 1997; Schuengel, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van IJzendoorn, 1999) and their infants are more likely to be classified as disorganized/disoriented in Ainsworth's Strange Situation procedure (Lyons-Ruth, Bronfman, & Parsons, 1999; Schuengel et al., 1999). Moreover, adults placed in the unresolved group are also assigned a best fitting alternate major classification – secure, dismissing, or preoccupied. Therefore, adults can be unresolved/secure, unresolved/dismissing, unresolved/preoccupied, or unresolved/insecure (collapsing the dismissing and preoccupied groups). Empirical evidence suggests that the caregiving behaviors of unresolved/secure adults differ from the behaviors of unresolved/insecure adults (Schuengel et al., 1999) and that couple-conflict strategies of unresolved/secure individuals differ from the couple-conflict strategies of unresolved/insecure individuals (Creasey, in press). Conceptual differences between the unresolved classification on the AAI and the fearful attachment style on the self-report instrument make it difficult to compare findings generated from these assessments.

Secure current state of mind and secure attachment styles

The two types of attachment measures also provide different assessments of attachment security. Depending on the particular self-report measure of adult attachment styles, subjects either place themselves into a secure group or endorse items such that low scores on the avoidant and anxious dimension indicate that they are high on security. The AAI classification system, on the other hand, allows researchers to differentiate among adults placed in the secure category. Specifically, the AAI coding system assesses both *what* it appears to coders happened to adults during their childhood as well as *how* adults talk about what happened during their childhood. It is then possible to distinguish secure adults who seem to have had negative or even abusive childhood experiences, termed 'Earned Secure', from secure adults who recollect loving and caring relationships with their parents during childhood, termed 'Continuous Secure'. Paley, Cox, Burchinal and Payne (1999) provide evidence that this distinction might be important in understanding the relationship between attachment security in adulthood and adult romantic relationships. 'Continuous Secure' husbands showed more positive affect and less ambivalence towards their wives during a problem-solving task than did 'Earned Secure' husbands. Collapsing continuous and earned secure adults into one group could obscure important differences among secure adults.

THE TWO TYPES OF ATTACHMENT MEASURES: A COMPARISON OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Self-report measures of couple relationships

Leaving aside the issue of whether the AAI and self-report instruments classify individuals differently, given the similar theoretical underpinnings of both research traditions, it still makes sense to ask whether studies using both methodologies obtain similar findings about romantic relationship functioning. Only a few studies have examined the relationship between adult attachment categories on the AAI and adults' appraisals of their romantic relationships. Dismissing adults did not differ from adults

classified as either secure or preoccupied on a self-report measure of trust (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1997). Using all four attachment groups in their study of men, Holtzworth-Munroe et al. (1997) found that men classified as dismissing had the highest mean level of trust but that this level differed significantly only from men classified as unresolved. Similarly, using a sample of 138 couples, Paley et al. (1999) found no relationship between the three primary attachment groups (assessed with the AAI) and either husbands' or wives' perceptions of intimacy, love and ambivalence in their marriage. In other words, self-reported relationship functioning did not seem to have much to do with AAI-classified attachment status.

Although non-significant results are difficult to interpret and only a handful of studies have examined associations between the AAI and self-reports of adult love relationships, findings in these studies raise questions about the accuracy of self-reported relationship data gathered from these adults. During the AAI, dismissing and preoccupied states are considered to be strategies that people developed to cope with the anxiety aroused during discussions of attachment-related experiences. The relationship questionnaires could have aroused anxiety, thereby raising the defenses used by dismissing adults and reducing the accuracy of their reports. Findings from a study tracking adults' galvanic skin response (GSR), a sign of autonomic arousal usually associated with anxiety, while the AAI was in progress provide support for this idea. Dismissing adults showed higher GSR levels than did secure adults during discussions of separations, losses and other potential traumas. Further, at the moments their GSR levels spiked, dismissing people made statements that minimized the extent to which these attachment-related experiences affected them (Dozier & Kobak, 1992).

Studies of the relationship between self-reports of adult romantic attachment styles and self-reports of relationship functioning have yielded a different pattern of results than the pattern found using the AAI. Specifically, secure adults on a romantic attachment measure scored higher on self-reported trust than did insecure adults (Mikulincer, 1998; Simpson, 1990). There is an impressive body of research linking differences in the adult romantic attachment styles with other qualities of romantic relationships, including commitment, relationship satisfaction, interdependence, communication, conflict resolution strategies, sexual attitudes and behaviors, expression of sexuality, response to stress, anxiety, loneliness, grief, patterns of self-disclosure, among others (see Feeney, 1999 for a comprehensive review). As mentioned earlier, self-reported attachment styles tap people's conscious appraisals of their approach to romantic relationships. It is possible that people accurately perceive their general style of relating in love relationships, thus accounting for the association between these attachment self-reports and other self-report assessments of relationship functioning. It is equally plausible that people's biases, and even distortions, about themselves systematically influence their responses across self-report assessments of relationship functioning contributing to the associations found between them. As discussed later in this paper, recent studies investigating the relationship between self-reported assessments of attachment style and observational ratings of couple interaction behaviors shed light on this issue.

Behavioral measures of couple relationships

An important criterion for determining the validity of any attachment assessment in adulthood is to see if it is linked to attachment-related behaviors. Recently, associations between infant attachment security and attachment security as assessed using

the AAI 20 years later with the same individuals has been established in three of four low-risk samples (Hamilton, 2000; Main, 2001; Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000). Further, a prospective longitudinal study following people over time has demonstrated impressive associations between maternal sensitivity during infancy and AAI assessments of attachment security in adulthood (Beckwith, Cohen, & Hamilton, 1999). Over nearly two decades, many laboratories have shown remarkable associations among caregivers' attachment security (using the AAI), their sensitivity to their own infants' signals, and their infants' response to them in the Strange Situation procedure (see Hesse, 1999 for a comprehensive review). More recently, investigators have begun using the AAI to compare the quality of couple interactions among adults classified as secure, dismissing, preoccupied, or unresolved with respect to loss and/or trauma.

Specifically, findings from five different laboratories have demonstrated relationships between AAI classifications and behavioral observations of couple interactions. In each study, researchers administered the AAI to their participants and then video-taped couples interacting on problem-solving tasks that involved discussing a problem area of continuing disagreement. Using a sample of 138 couples, Paley et al. (1999) found that dismissing wives, vs. secure wives, showed greater amounts of withdrawal from their husbands during problem-solving discussions, and secure wives showed higher levels of positive affect than did insecure wives. Similar results were obtained in three other middle-class, low-risk samples (Creasey, in press; Crowell, Treboux, Gao, Pan, Waters, Fyffe, in press; Jacobvitz, Booher, & Hazen, 2001). Analyzing video-taped interactions of 155 engaged couples, Crowell et al. (in press) found that both men and women classified as secure on the AAI (vs. insecure) were more likely to provide a secure base for their partner and to use their partner as a secure base when conflicts arose between them. Similarly, using a sample of 125 couples, Jacobvitz et al. (2001) reported that interactions between secure wives and secure husbands (vs. secure wife/insecure husband and insecure wife/insecure husband pairs) were rated higher on emotional engagement and metacognition, an ability to reflect on their behavior during the ongoing interaction. Furthermore, in a sample of 144 romantic couples, Creasey (in press) found that secure females engaged in more positive behavior whereas dismissing and preoccupied males engaged in more negative behavior in a conflict management condition. Additionally, both males and females classified as unresolved/insecure were particularly vulnerable to more negative behavior, particularly in terms of exhibiting controlling behavior.

Finally, Babcock, Jacobson, Gottman and Yerington's (2000) study investigated couple interaction differences among 39 unhappily married men. Dismissing husbands were the most controlling and distancing, and preoccupied husbands the least distancing during the marital interactions. Interestingly, unhappily married secure husbands were significantly more defensive than unhappily married husbands in the two insecure groups. Finding associations between the AAI and couple interactions in five different research laboratories is impressive, especially given that the AAI does not assess romantic relationships.

Relating the romantic attachment questionnaires to couple behaviors is also important in ascertaining the predictive validity of this measure and bridging research using the AAI and romantic attachment questionnaires. Studies relating the self-reported romantic attachment styles to interactions among romantic couples have now been carried out in three laboratories. These investigators have employed clever designs in which the attachment system could be presumed activated so that researchers could

observe how partners respond to one another under stress. Simpson and colleagues video-taped 83 couples in a waiting-room after the female partner had been told she was going to engage in an anxiety-provoking task. Avoidant people engaged in higher levels of distancing behavior with a romantic partner when they were upset than did the other subjects (Simpson et al., 1992). Using the same interaction data, Campbell, Simpson, Kashy and Rholes (2001) reported that avoidant people displayed more negative emotions, acted more irritated, and were more critical of their partners than were less avoidant individuals. Moreover, people who had more avoidant partners showed greater irritation and aggravation than people with less avoidant partners. In an observational study of 54 females and 38 males separating from their romantic partners at the airport, Fraley and Shaver (1998) found a modest but significant correlation between women who scored high on the avoidance dimension and observational ratings of avoidant and contact-seeking behavior upon separation. Similarly, as predicted, men who scored high on avoidance showed lower levels of sadness upon separation. Interestingly, significant results were obtained for men but not for women on the anxiety dimension. However, men who scored high on the anxiety dimension were observed to show more avoidance.

Two other studies examined relations between reported attachment styles and couple interactions during tasks designed to produce conflict between partners. Simpson, Rholes and Phillips (1996) demonstrated the predicted associations between adult attachment styles and behavioral interactions among 123 couples. Observer ratings revealed that more ambivalent women displayed higher levels of stress and anxiety, and engaged in more negative behaviors during the couple interactions. Conversely, more avoidant men were rated as less warm and supportive, especially while discussing a major problem. Feeney (1998) asked couples to engage in three interactions, one which involved conflict over the use of leisure time and two more which involved one partner rebuffing the other's attempts to maintain closeness. Attachment security was unrelated to couple behavior during the discussion of leisure time use but was linked with less negative affect, less avoidant non-verbal behavior, and more constructive conversation patterns in response to a partner's distancing behavior. In sum, this research, pairing self-reported attachment and observations of attachment behavior in couple relationships, provides initial data validating the attachment self-report assessment. It is important, however, that investigators who rely primarily on correlations among self-report measures continue to conduct studies that use a multi-method approach and include both self-report instruments and behavioral assessments of couple interactions.

In conclusion, further research is needed to examine whether the two types of attachment instruments are measuring the same constructs. The above summary suggests that there is less convergence in research findings on romantic relationships from studies using self-reports, the AAI, and observed behavior, than might be expected given the common theoretical roots of the two research traditions. However, a comparison of the studies using the two types of attachment measures is difficult because relatively few researchers have examined associations between romantic attachment measures and couple behavior, and between the AAI measure and self-report measures of romantic relationships. Future studies using similar methodologies to address the same questions would shed light on whether the two measures tap the same attachment construct. It would also be interesting to identify dismissing adults (using the AAI) who do and do not score high on the avoidant dimension to understand the conditions under which dismissing adults can be aware of their own

relationship difficulties and whether such an awareness would allow them to change and improve the quality of their romantic relationships.

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