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Adolescent Perceptions of Attachment: Parents, Friends, and Impact on Self Esteem

Janis Paterson

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Attachment is generally described as an enduring affectional bond of substantial intensity. Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory implies that optimal outcomes are associated with an attachment relationship that is characterised by a confidence in the accessibility and responsiveness of the caregiver. Three studies were designed to explore changes in New Zealand adolescents' perceptions of their attachment to mothers, fathers, and friends, and the relative impact of these relationships on three measures of self esteem. Two dimensions of the attachment relationship were assessed, the utilisation of emotional support and proximity, and the quality of affect.

Study 1 (n = 180) revealed that although adolescents utilised their mothers for support and proximity more than their fathers, and perceived their mothers as more responsive than fathers, they did not differ in their quality of affect towards their parents. Friends were utilised significantly more in support seeking situations than in proximity seeking situations.

Study 2 (n = 493) revealed that male and female adolescents differed in their perceptions of their attachment to mothers in late adolescence. With increasing age, females reported that they would utilise maternal support and proximity more, whereas males reported utilising their mothers less in both types of situation. However, both male and female adolescents continued to report a high quality of affect towards their mothers throughout adolescence. No differences were found in male and female adolescents' perceptions of their attachment to fathers. With increasing age, males and females utilised paternal support and proximity less, and reported a lower quality of affect towards their fathers. Adolescents continued to utilise their friends highly for support throughout adolescence, and increased their utilisation of friends for proximity as they got older. Regardless of age, females reported a higher quality of affect towards their friends than males. These findings
suggested that substantial changes take place in attachment relationships from early to late adolescence, and that these changes are affected by the sex of the adolescent and the sex of the parent. Further analyses revealed that Pacific Island adolescents utilised their mothers significantly less for support than European/Pakeha adolescents. Adolescents from one-parent families utilised their fathers significantly less for support and proximity, and had a lower quality of affect towards them than adolescents from two-parent families. The utilisation of support and proximity from mothers, fathers, and friends was minimally related to overall self esteem, coping abilities and social competence. The quality of affect towards mothers and fathers was significantly related to all three measures of self esteem, whereas the quality of affect towards friends was significantly related only to social competence. Adolescent attachment to parents appears to exert a relatively stronger effect on self esteem than adolescent attachment to friends, regardless of the sex or age of the adolescent.

Study 3 (n = 80) examined the main reasons for utilising parents and friends for emotional support, and for feeling close to parents and friends. Content analysis revealed that the reasons did not differ according to the age or sex of the adolescent but varied according to the attachment figure.

Overall, the three studies revealed that New Zealand adolescents' descriptions of their relationships with parents and friends differed at both the cognitive-affective and behavioural levels of attachment. The divergent patterns of support seeking and proximity seeking highlighted these differences, and clearly illustrated the need to distinguish these two aspects of the behavioural dimension of attachment in adolescence. The implications of the findings for adolescent attachment to parents and friends are considered, and future directions for research are discussed.
We shall not cease from Exploration
And at the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T. S. Eliot
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Chapter One
THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS
Attachment Theory
Attachment in Adolescence
Adolescents’ Relationships with Parents
Adolescents’ Relationships with Friends
Adolescent Attachment and Self Esteem
Gender Differences

Chapter Two
LITERATURE REVIEW
Attachment in Infancy and Early Childhood
Attachment in Adolescence
The Two Dimensions of Adolescent Attachment
Perceived Adolescent Attachment and Self Esteem
Other Variables that may Affect Adolescent Attachment
Rationale and Aims

EMPirical Studies: Method and Results

Chapter Three
PILOT STUDY

Chapter Four
MAIN QUESTIONNAIRE STUDY
Descriptive Statistics
Effects of Age, Sex, and Sociodemographic Variables
Relationship between Dimensions of Attachment
Relationship between Dimensions of Attachment and Self Esteem
Impact of Attachment on Self Esteem across Age and Sex

Chapter Five
INTERVIEW STUDY

DISCUSSION

APPENDICES
REFERENCES
LIST OF FIGURES

1 Percentage of adolescents who utilised both parents, mother only, father only, and friends in support seeking and proximity seeking situations. 67

2 Mean utilisation scores for mothers, fathers, and friends in support seeking and proximity seeking situations. 79

3A Mean scores for mother and father responsiveness and importance in support seeking situations. 80

3B Mean scores for mother and father responsiveness and importance in proximity seeking situations. 81

4A Mean male and female utilisation scores for mothers, fathers, and friends in support seeking situations. 84

4B Mean male and female utilisation scores for mothers, fathers, and friends in proximity seeking situations. 85

5 Mean utilisation scores for mothers in support seeking and proximity seeking situations for each ethnic group. 86

6 Mean utilisation scores for fathers in support seeking and proximity seeking for one-parent and two-parent families. 87

7A Mean male and female scores for mother and father responsiveness in support seeking situations. 88

7B Mean male and female scores for mother and father responsiveness in proximity seeking situations. 89

8 Mean mother responsiveness scores in support seeking and proximity seeking situations for each ethnic group. 89

9 Mean father responsiveness scores in support seeking and proximity seeking situations in one-parent and two-parent families. 91

10A Mean male and female scores for mother and father importance in support seeking situations for each age group. 92

10B Mean male and female scores for mother and father importance in proximity seeking situations for each age group. 93

11 Mean father importance scores in support seeking and proximity seeking situations for one-parent and two-parent families. 94

12 Mean quality of affect towards fathers for one-parent and two-parent families. 95
LIST OF TABLES

1 Details of samples and measuring instruments in studies of adolescent attachment and adolescent self esteem. 36
2 Age and sex distribution of the sample. 74
3 Mean quality of affect scores for mothers, fathers and friends. 81
4 Correlations between the utilisation of mothers and fathers in SS and PS situations and their responsiveness and importance in such situations. 97
5 Correlations between utilisation of mothers, fathers and friends in SS and PS situations and the quality of affect towards that target figure. 98
6 Correlations between parents and friends on the two dimensions of attachment. 99
7 Correlations between the two dimensions of adolescent attachment to mothers, fathers and friends and overall self esteem, social competence and coping abilities. 100
8 Main reasons for utilising mothers, fathers and friends for support. 106
9 Individual case examples of reasons given for utilising mothers, fathers and friends for support. 107
10 The main reasons for not utilising mothers, fathers and friends for support. 109
11 Individual case examples of reasons given for not utilising mothers, fathers and friends for support. 110
12 Main reasons for feeling close, or not close, to mothers and fathers. 112
13 Individual case examples of reasons given for feeling close, or not close, to mothers and fathers. 113
14 The main reasons given for feeling close to friends. 115
15 Individual case examples of reasons given for feeling close to friends. 116
## List of Appendices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Questionnaire for pilot study.</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Percentage of adolescents who utilised both parents, mother only, father only, and friends in positive, negative, and threatening situations.</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Consent forms and information sheets for parents and subjects for the questionnaire study.</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Perceived attachment measures for the questionnaire study.</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Self esteem measures for the questionnaire study.</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mean utilisation scores of mothers, fathers, and friends in positive, negative and threatening situations.</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Subject consent forms and information sheets for the interview.</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Semi-structured interview guide.</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>