Adolescent relationships and mental health: An attachment perspective

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Roadmap

- Mental health and youth
- Attachment theory and adolescence: Contemporary context
- Adolescent attachment
- Measurement of attachment in adults and adolescents
- Selected studies
  - Focus on different levels of attachment conceptualisation.
Mental Health and Youth in Australia
12-Month Prevalence of Mental Disorders in Australia

Based on Slade et al. (2009)
Mental Health and Youth

• Mental ill health contributes to nearly half of the burden of disease in young people and 75 per cent of mental health problems occur before the age of 25 (Kessler et al, 2007; Kessler, et al., 2005).

• Severe disorders are typically preceded by less severe disorders. By age 21, around 50% young people will have experienced a diagnosable psychiatric disorder (Kessler et al, 2007; Kessler, et al., 2005).
Mental Health and Youth

• The longitudinal impact of mental health problems in adolescence can be pervasive including:
  
  – Disrupted and problematic relationships (Boden et al., 2008; Kobak & Madsen, 2008)
  
  – Future negative mental health outcomes and higher welfare dependence (Fergusson, et al., 2007; Jonsson et al., 2011).
  
  – Reduced workforce participation, lower income and lower economic living standards (Gibb et al., 2010).
Mental Health and Youth

• Young people do not access services for mental health problems as often as other age groups (AIHW, 2011).

• Young people are most likely to talk to friends or family members as the first step in seeking support (Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007).
Relationships and Psychological Health

• What is the link between the quality of those close interpersonal relationships and psychological health?

• Does attachment theory offer some understanding of both the genesis and maintenance of psychological disorder in young people.
Attachment theory and adolescence: The contemporary context
Attachment Theory

• Developmental theory
• Clinical Theory
• Social psychological theory
• Personality theory
• Object-relations theory
• Evolutionary theory
• Theory of love
• Theory of close-interpersonal relationships and psychological health.
Origins of Attachment Theory
Ainsworth’s Legacy
Contemporary Attachment Theorists
Adolescent Attachment
Adolescent Attachment

• Relationship networks are expanding
• Processes of individuation and self-concept formation
• Knowledge of self from social relationships
• Movement of attachment functions into other relationships
• Attachments are in a state of flux.
Attachment is Networked and Hierarchical

Overall, Fletcher, & Friesen, 2003
Adolescent Attachment Hierarchy

Anxiety and Avoidance Dimensions

Parents
- Mum
- Dad

Friends
- Kylie
- Arjuna

Romantic Partners
- Dee
Measuring Attachment in Adolescence
Measuring Broad Attachment Dimensions

• Movement from categorical to dimensional measures.
• Consensus on underlying dimensions of insecure attachment.
  – Anxiety (Preoccupation, Hyperactivation, Model of Self)
  – Avoidance (Dismissing, Deactivation, Model of Other)
• Measured initially as romantic attachment in adults.
• Experiences in Close Relationships (Brennan et al., 1998)
• Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised (Fraley et al., 2000)
• Experience in Close Relationships – Revised – General Short Form (Wilkinson, 2011)
The ECR-R-GSF

- Shorter – 10 items for each scale.
- General close relationships rather than romantic relationships.
- Some modification to language for younger readership.
- Same response rating scale.
- Anxiety and Avoidance factors replicated irrespective of age or gender.

(Wilkinson, 2011)
Domain Level Assessment

- The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987).
  - Parent Scale – 28 items
    - Trust, Communication, Alienation subscales
  - Peer Scale – 25 items
    - Trust, Communication, Alienation subscales
  - Not based on the anxiety/avoidance models.
- The most widely used measure of adolescent attachment. (Wilson & Wilkinson, 2012)
Specific Relationship Level Assessment

- IPPA modifications: IPPA-45 (Wilkinson, 2012)
- Parent scale separated into Mother and Father Scales.
- Adolescent Friendship Attachment Scale (AFAS) (Wilkinson, 2008)
  - Developed to assess best-friend attachment.
  - 30 items
  - Secure, Anxious, and Avoidant subscales.

Sample items:

- I think it would be difficult to replace my friend.
- I worry about becoming too close to my friend.
- I don’t need to rely on my friend.
- I don’t like depending on my friend.
- I avoid discussing personal things with my friend.
- I seek out my friend when things go wrong.*
Selected RAPH Lab studies
Key Questions

• Do parental and peer attachments have different relationships to psychological health and self-esteem in adolescents.

• Specifically, does self-esteem mediate the relationship of both parental and peer attachment on depression in adolescents.
A Mediation Model

Diagram:
- Depression
- Self-Esteem
- Parental Attachment
- Peer Attachment

Connections:
- Depression to Self-Esteem
- Self-Esteem to Parental Attachment
- Parental Attachment to Peer Attachment
- Peer Attachment to Depression
Methods

- 3 studies
- 2680 Norwegian and Australian 12 to 20 year olds.
- Various measures of the constructs including:
  - IPPA
  - 10 item Depression scale
  - Rosenberg Self Esteem Inventory
  - Perceived Community Problems
Study One Model

\[ X^2 = 73.25 \text{ df} = 27, \ p > .001 \]
AGFI = .985
CFI = .993
RMSEA = .029
Outcome

- Peer attachment is related more to self-esteem than directly to depression.
- Parental attachment is linked to both self-esteem and depression.
- What about specific relationships though?
- Are these relationships different depending on age and gender?
Key Questions

• Is the link between attachment and depression different for boys and girls.

• Is the link between attachment and depression different for younger and older adolescents
Method

• Sample
  – 291 girls and 324 boys
  – 13.5 to 18.7 years

• Measures
  – IPPA 45: 15 item Mother, Father, and Peer Scales
  – 10 item depression scale
  – 16 item self-esteem scale (SLSC-R)
## Multiple Regression on Self-Esteem and Depression – Younger versus Older

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Younger β</th>
<th>Older β</th>
<th>z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Esteem</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.323*</td>
<td>.375*</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Attachment</td>
<td>.329*</td>
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<td>Father Attachment</td>
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<td>.102</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
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<td>.199*</td>
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<td><strong>Depression</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
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<td>-.191*</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1.08</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-.209*</td>
<td>1.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer Attachment</td>
<td>-.072</td>
<td>-.207*</td>
<td>1.67*</td>
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### Multiple Regression on Self-Esteem and Depression - Girls versus Boys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Female β</th>
<th>Male β</th>
<th>z</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Esteem</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
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<td>-.063</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Father Attachment</td>
<td>.075</td>
<td>.191*</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Attachment</td>
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<td>.155*</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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</table>

#### Depression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Female β</th>
<th>Male β</th>
<th>z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.116</td>
<td>.053</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Attachment</td>
<td>-.308*</td>
<td>-.074</td>
<td>2.95*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Attachment</td>
<td>-.168*</td>
<td>-.358*</td>
<td>-2.47*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Attachment</td>
<td>-.193*</td>
<td>-.055</td>
<td>1.70*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Outcome

- Complex pattern.
- Depends on what the outcome variable is.
- Differences for age.
- Differences for gender.
- Supports changing patterns of attachments.
- But what about specific peer relationships?
Key Questions

- Are ‘best friend’ relationships (specific) also associated with psychological health in addition to ‘peer’ relationships (domain).
Method

- **Participants**
  - 266 boys and 229 girls
  - 13 and 19 years.

- **Measures**
  - AFAS
  - IPPA 45
  - Depression (10 item)
  - School Attitude (10 item)
## Multiple Regressions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>( \beta ) for Depression</th>
<th>( \beta ) for School Attitude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>-.165*</td>
<td>-.190*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.101*</td>
<td>.157*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Attachment</td>
<td>-.167*</td>
<td>.157*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Attachment</td>
<td>-.216*</td>
<td>.055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Attachment</td>
<td>-.094</td>
<td>.175*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFAS Secure</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>.082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFAS Anxious</td>
<td>.157*</td>
<td>-.135*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFAS Avoidant</td>
<td>.120*</td>
<td>-.146*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( R^2 )</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Comments

• Best friend attachment predicts outcomes even when controlling for:
  – Specific mother and father attachment
  – Domain level peer attachment

• Specific but not domain level peer attachment predicts depression.

• Peer Attachment ≠ Best Friend Attachment

• What happens when a key attachment figure is not around?
Sample

• Participants were 647 female and 400 male high-school students.
• Aged between 13.5 and 18.9 years (M = 16.81, SD = 0.86).
• 78.5% were categorized as middle to upper socio-economic status.
## Fathers Absence/Presence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>180 (63.6%)</td>
<td>103 (36.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>461 (61.1%)</td>
<td>293 (38.9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Measures – Relationships and Attachment

- IPPA-45
- Depression (10 item)
- Family Cohesion (6 items)
## Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Absent Father</th>
<th>Present Father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maternal</td>
<td>3.49 (0.90)</td>
<td>3.60 (0.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternal</td>
<td>2.79 (0.94)</td>
<td>3.30 (0.82)#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>3.67 (0.61)</td>
<td>3.64 (0.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Family Cohesion</td>
<td>2.62 (0.66)</td>
<td>2.52 (0.58)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Paternal Attachment Interaction

The graph shows the relationship between paternal attachment and the presence or absence of the father, differentiated by gender.

- **IPP Paternal** indicates the level of paternal involvement.
- **Father** is categorized as either absent or present.
- **Girls** are represented by a green line.
- **Boys** are represented by a blue line.

The graph illustrates a trend where paternal attachment is higher when the father is present compared to when he is absent, and this trend is consistent across both genders.
Correlations with Depression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Absent Father</th>
<th>Present Father</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maternal</td>
<td>-.362</td>
<td>-.249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternal</td>
<td>-.310</td>
<td>-.290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>-.319</td>
<td>-.164</td>
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</table>
Outcome

• No compensation evident
• Adolescents have a lower quality attachment to their absent father, but
• This was more the case for girls more than boys.
• Father absence is related to the importance of peers to psychological health.
Method

- 920 high school students – 15 to 19 years
- 528 girls and 392 boys
- Measures
  - ECR-R-GSF
  - IPPA-45
  - AFAS Anxiety and Avoidance scales
  - 10 item Depression scale
Hierarchical Multiple Regression on Depression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IV</th>
<th>β In</th>
<th>Final β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.064</td>
<td>-.140*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious Attachment</td>
<td>.282*</td>
<td>.120*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoidant Attachment</td>
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<td>.049</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother Attachment</td>
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<td>-.159*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Father Attachment</td>
<td>-.162*</td>
<td>-.157*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer Attachment</td>
<td>-.240*</td>
<td>-.246*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Friend Anxiety</td>
<td>.105*</td>
<td>.105*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Friend Avoidance</td>
<td>-.097*</td>
<td>-.097*</td>
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</table>

Adjusted R² = .243
### Multiple Regression on Depression: Girls versus Boys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IV</th>
<th>Girls $\beta$ (n = 528)</th>
<th>Boys $\beta$ (n = 392)</th>
<th>$z$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>-.024</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious Attachment</td>
<td>-.162*</td>
<td>-.006</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>.019</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoidant Attachment</td>
<td>-.013</td>
<td>-.108</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Attachment</td>
<td>.170*</td>
<td>.096</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Attachment</td>
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<td>.281*</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>.010</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer Attachment</td>
<td>.256*</td>
<td>.223*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Best Friend Anxiety</td>
<td>-.074</td>
<td>-.143*</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Best Friend Avoid.</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>.274*</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.257</td>
<td>.252</td>
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Multiple Regression on Depression: Younger versus Older

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IV</th>
<th>Younger β (n = 387)</th>
<th>Older β (n = 533)</th>
<th>z</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.172*</td>
<td>.110*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Anxious Attachment</td>
<td>-.166*</td>
<td>-.078</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant Attachment</td>
<td>-.062</td>
<td>-.027</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Attachment</td>
<td>.147*</td>
<td>.166*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Attachment</td>
<td><strong>.227</strong>*</td>
<td>.101**</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>.052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Attachment</td>
<td>.270*</td>
<td>.235*</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Friend Anxiety</td>
<td>-.066*</td>
<td>-.149*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Friend Avoid.</td>
<td>.095*</td>
<td>.089*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.257</td>
<td>.208</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Outcomes

• Specific attachment relationship measures were predictive of depression after controlling for general attachment dimensions.
• There are, however, important gender and age interactions.
• The role of father attachment varied by both age and gender.
Overall Comments

• Complex links between types of relationships and kind of outcomes.
• Attachment measures, irrespective of level, contribute to variance in depression.
• When considering the impact of attachment on psychological health we must become more sophisticated.
• Both general expectations of relationships and the specific qualities of actual relationships are implicated in adolescent psychological health.
• Approaches that rely on either one or the other are problematic.
Implications for Interventions

- Relationships matter – often ignored or downplayed in psychological interventions.
- General expectations about relationships (traditional attachment working models) should be addressed.
- Current relationships are not unimportant.
- Intra-psychic and behavioural (contextual) factors need to be addressed.
- Psychological health begins in infancy but comes to the fore in adolescence.
- Population and individual interventions required.
Acknowledgments - Past and Present RAPH Lab team members

- Wendy Walford
- Elizabeth Haigh
- Marlene Parry
- Monica Kraljevic
- Daphne Goh
- Jessica Wilson
- Sheereen Zulkefly


Thank you and Questions.

Please visit us at
http://psychology.anu.edu.au/RAPH_Lab/