

DOES REARING ENVIRONMENT SHAPE ROMANTIC ATTACHMENT STYLE?

USING SIBLINGS TO TEST FOR SHARED ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES

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Introduction

Attachment research began when John Bowlby recognized the importance of the bonds, or “attachments,” formed between infants and their caregivers. In the late 1980s, psychologists extended Bowlby’s research into the domain of adult romantic love by proposing that romantic love can be conceptualized as a process of becoming attached (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Relationship scientists documented that individuals differ in two primary attachment dimensions: *avoidance*, or the extent to which individuals are uncomfortable with closeness, and *anxiety*, the extent to which individuals worry about abandonment in their relationships (Feeney, Noller, & Callan, 1994). Since Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) initial conceptualization of romantic love as an attachment process, researchers have documented links between attachment dimensions and memories of one’s relationships with parents during childhood, parental relationship status (e.g., divorced), and one’s own current and past romantic relationship experiences. Research has not, however, determined the causes of individual differences in romantic attachment style.

We conducted a series of studies to explore the possibility that romantic attachment style is transmitted via the family, either through shared genes or shared rearing environment. Family members should be similar in attachment style if it is transmitted familiarly. In Study 1, we investigated similarity in attachment dimensions among 180 adult children and their parents. In Study 2, we again investigated similarity among 169 adult children and their parents; we also collected data from 52 siblings to determine if being reared in the same home induces similarity between siblings’ romantic attachment styles. In Study 3, we collected attachment and personality data from 78 young adult sibling pairs.

Method

Study 1: Young Adults and Their Parents

A total of 183 young adults (46 men, 137 women) participated. They completed a 36-item attachment questionnaire that provides scores on continuous dimensions of anxiety and avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Sample items on the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) inventory include “I worry about being abandoned by my romantic partners” (anxiety) and “I try to avoid getting close to my partners” (avoidance). Participants provided their responses on a seven-point rating scale (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). Internal reliabilities in our samples exceeded .90.

We mailed a blank version of the ECR to each participant’s mom and/or dad. Forty-five percent of fathers and 65% of mothers returned their questionnaires, resulting in 87 child-father pairs and 120 child-mother pairs.

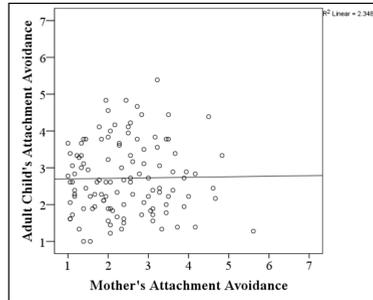
Study 2: Young Adults and Their Parents and Siblings

A new sample of 169 pairs of young adults and their parent(s) participated in our second study. To augment the previous dataset, we mailed the ECR to one sibling of each participant (if they had a sibling of 18 years or older). A total of 52 siblings sent in questionnaires. In addition, participants completed the brief but internally valid Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI). This measure was used to establish the validity of our sample.

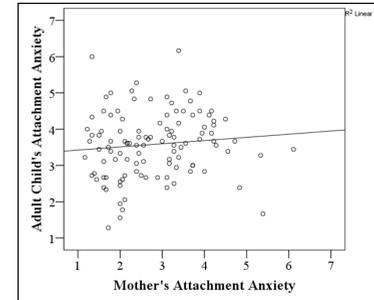
Study 3: Young Adults and Their Siblings

Our third sample included 92 young adults (22 men, 70 women) and 78 of their siblings who completed the ECR as well as the 44-item Big Five Inventory. Again, personality measures were included to establish the validity of our sample.

Study 1

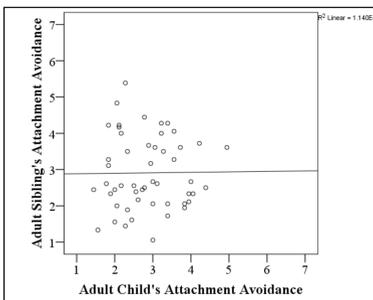


In Study 1, we investigated similarity between adult children and their parents’ attachment styles. Similarity would support the hypothesis that the parents’ own relationship functioning is transmitted to children either through shared environment or shared genes. Contrary to that hypothesis, young adults were not similar to their parents in either attachment anxiety or attachment avoidance, all r s < .11, all p s > .28. The results for child-mother pairs are displayed at left and right; the results with fathers were identical.

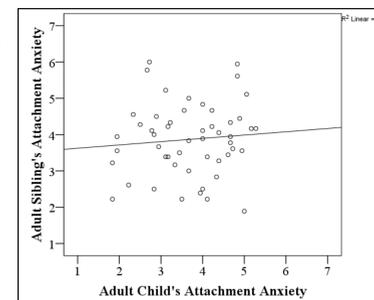


Study 1: Sample Descriptive Statistics	Young Adult Men (n=46)	Young Adult Women (n=137)	Fathers (n=85-86)	Mothers (n=112-117)
Attachment Avoidance	2.87 (0.83)	2.70 (0.94)	2.49 (0.85)	2.42 (1.00)
Attachment Anxiety	3.45 (0.76)	3.74 (0.92)	3.00 (0.94)	2.79 (1.05)

Study 2

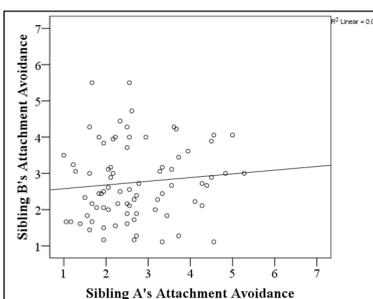


In Study 2, we again investigated similarity between adult children and their parents. We also included data from 52 of the young adults’ siblings. Similarity between siblings would support the hypothesis that being raised in the same home (in a similar family environment) induces similarity in romantic attachment style. Pair-wise associations showed no significant similarity between family members, all r s < .15, all p s > .16. The results for sibling pairs are displayed at right and left.

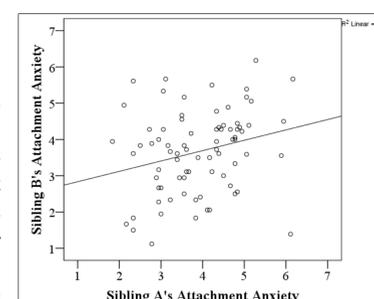


Study 2: Sample Descriptive Statistics	Young Adults (n=43M, 125F)	Young Adults' Siblings (n=17M, 35F)	Fathers (n=71-72)	Mothers (n=89-92)
Attachment Avoidance	2.81 (0.93)	2.87 (1.03)	2.53 (0.86)	2.59 (1.01)
Attachment Anxiety	3.62 (0.96)	3.84 (0.99)	3.04 (0.96)	2.90 (1.10)

Study 3



In Study 3, we had attachment data from 78 pairs of siblings, again testing the hypothesis that sharing a rearing environment induces similarity in romantic attachment style. As in Study 2, siblings were not similar in avoidance, $r(78) = .10, p = .379$; however, siblings were weakly to moderately similar in attachment anxiety, $r(78) = .25, p = .026$. Further, the association held at $r = .28$ after controlling for siblings’ neuroticism, a personality trait which is consistently associated with experiencing attachment anxiety.



Study 3: Sample Descriptive Statistics	Young Adult Men (n=22)	Young Adult Women (n=70)	Young Adults' Brothers (n=31)	Young Adults' Sisters (n=47)
Attachment Avoidance	2.73 (1.12)	2.55 (0.96)	2.87 (1.10)	2.67 (1.01)
Attachment Anxiety	3.66 (0.99)	3.85 (1.02)	3.61 (0.89)	3.70 (1.28)

Discussion

The results of Studies 1 and 2 illustrated that parents’ attitudes toward their romantic relationships, as assessed by the Experiences in Close Relationships inventory, are not similar to their children’s attitudes and thus are not transmitted to them via either role model or shared genes. In trying to interpret this lack of similarity between adult children and their parents, we observed that the parents in Studies 1 and 2 scored relatively low overall in anxiety and avoidance. Other studies have documented that people in long-standing relationships (as most of these parents were) tend to score low in avoidance and anxiety. Associations can be difficult to detect when there is restriction of range. Thus, in Studies 2 and 3 we utilized siblings to test for the familial transmission of attachment style with samples that would be more likely to vary widely in their attachment scores. Again, however, the weight of the evidence from Studies 2 and 3 suggests little similarity between family members. Taken together, our findings suggest that a substantial proportion of individual differences in romantic attachment style are due to differences in *non-shared* environmental influences (such as individuals’ unique relationship histories) as opposed to genetic differences or shared rearing environments.

The non-significant associations we found do not appear to be a product of biased sampling because our samples functioned much like previous samples in several ways: (1) In Studies 1 and 2 the parents were more secure than were the young adults, and in Studies 2 and 3 the young men were less anxious than the young women; (2) in Studies 1 and 2, romantic partners (mothers and fathers) were not similar to each other in their attachment scores; (3) in Studies 2 and 3, individuals who scored higher in attachment anxiety also scored higher in the personality trait Neuroticism; (4) in Study 2, family members showed weak but positive similarity in the primary personality traits of Neuroticism and Extraversion; and in Study 3, family members showed weak-to-moderate similarity in the primary personality traits of Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, and Openness.

Select References

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