

The Influence of Parent-Child Attachment in the Family of Origin on Adult Intimate Relationship Patterns: Stability, Plasticity and Cultural Specificity

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Abstract:

Attachment theory is a key framework for understanding how human interpersonal relationships develop, and it has long-term focused on the connection between parent-child attachment in the family of origin and the patterns of intimate relationships in adulthood. Based on classic studies by Bowlby, Ainsworth, Fraley, Thompson and Waters, this paper sorts out the theoretical basis and empirical findings about how parent-child attachment shapes adult intimate relationships. It also analyzes in detail how different types of parent-child attachment (secure, insecure-avoidant and insecure-resistant) influence people's cognitive, emotional and behavioral traits in adult intimate relationships. Furthermore, the paper explores the main mechanisms behind this influence from the perspective of attachment style stability and plasticity, and discusses the cultural specificity of this influence, as well as major methodological debates and moderating factors in current research. The study finds that parent-child attachment has a weak but significant impact on adult intimate relationships: secure parent-child attachment is linked to healthy and adaptable intimate relationship patterns in adulthood, while insecure attachment types tend to result in distant or conflicting interaction styles. However, this stability is not absolute, as negative life events and recent life experiences can change a person's attachment style to a great extent. In addition, the core functions of parent-child attachment's influence on adult intimate relationships are universal across cultures, but its expressions and formation mechanisms show obvious cultural specificity, which is shaped by cultural values such as individualism and collectivism. The paper also points out the limitations of current attachment research, including fragmented measurement methods, a lack of diverse cultural samples and an unclear gene-environment interaction mechanism, and puts forward relevant research

prospects and practical implications. The findings enrich the research on the developmental continuity of attachment theory and provide an important theoretical reference for intervening in unhealthy adult intimate relationship patterns and applying attachment theory across different cultures.

Keywords: Parent-child attachment; Family of origin; Adult intimate relationships; Attachment style; Cultural specificity; Stability and plasticity

Introduction

Research into how the family of origin affects an individual's social development has long been a popular topic in developmental and social psychology. As the core of early parent-child relationships in the family of origin, parent-child attachment is widely seen as the foundation for forming people's interpersonal relationship patterns (Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby's classic attachment theory first uncovered the evolutionary meaning of parent-child attachment, stating that infants form an internal working model (IWM) of interpersonal relationships through interactions with caregivers. This model lasts throughout life and influences how people build and maintain various interpersonal relationships in adulthood. Building on Bowlby's work, Ainsworth et al. (1978) divided parent-child attachment into three types—secure, insecure-avoidant and insecure-resistant. Through the Strange Situation Experiment, creating a standardized classification system for empirical research on attachment theory. Since then, numerous studies around the world have confirmed a correlation between parent-child attachment and adult intimate relationships: foreign longitudinal studies by Fraley and Roisman (2019) have found that early parent-child attachment styles can stably predict romantic attachment patterns in adulthood; domestic research has also proven that insecure parent-child attachment is a key risk factor for poor communication, low relationship satisfaction and frequent conflicts in adult intimate relationships. In addition, extending attachment theory from infant-parent relationships to adult intimate relationships has helped form a relatively complete theoretical system for researching this topic.

Despite the rich findings on the link between parent-child attachment and adult intimate relationships, there are still clear limitations in current research that need further exploration and improvement. First, there is no unified un-

derstanding of the strength and mechanism of parent-child attachment's influence on adult intimate relationships: some studies argue that early parent-child attachment has a decisive impact on adult intimate relationships, while more recent empirical research shows that parenting styles have only a limited effect, and subsequent life experiences can reshape a person's attachment style. Second, the cultural specificity of parent-child attachment's influence has not been fully explored: most classic attachment research is based on samples from Western individualistic cultures, and directly applying these conclusions to collectivist cultural contexts is often limited by cultural differences. Third, there are serious methodological debates in current attachment research, such as fragmented measurement tools, disagreements over whether to measure attachment styles as dimensions or categories, and low comparability of research results due to different assessment methods. Finally, research on the moderating factors of the link between parent-child attachment and adult intimate relationships is not comprehensive enough, and the interaction mechanism of relationship-specific attachment, genetic factors and environmental factors still needs more empirical evidence to be verified. Overall, current research lacks a systematic and critical analysis of how parent-child attachment affects adult intimate relationships, and the research perspectives are relatively single, making it hard to fully reveal the complexity and diversity of this connection.

To address the above limitations, this paper takes how parent-child attachment in the family of origin affects adult intimate relationship patterns and whether this influence has cultural specificity as its core research question, and conducts a comprehensive and in-depth analysis based on classic attachment theory and the latest empirical findings. First, the paper sorts out the theoretical foundation of attachment theory and the specific classification of parent-child attachment, clarifying the theoretical basis

for studying the link between parent-child attachment and adult intimate relationships. Second, it analyzes how different parent-child attachment types specifically influence the cognitive, emotional and behavioral traits of adult intimate relationships, revealing the different effects of various attachment styles. Third, it explores the core mechanism of this influence from the dual perspectives of attachment style stability and plasticity, and verifies the role of negative life events in changing attachment styles by combining longitudinal research results. Fourth, it discusses the cultural specificity of parent-child attachment's influence on adult intimate relationships, comparing the differences in attachment formation and expression in individualistic and collectivist cultural contexts. Fifth, it sorts out the key methodological debates in current attachment research and the main moderating factors of the link between parent-child attachment and adult intimate relationships, and puts forward corresponding solutions. Finally, the paper summarizes the core conclusions of the research, points out the limitations of current research and future research directions, and provides practical implications for intervening in unhealthy adult intimate relationship patterns. This paper attempts to build a multi-dimensional analysis framework for parent-child attachment's influence on adult intimate relationships, making up for the single research perspective in the current field and providing a more comprehensive theoretical reference for future research.

Body

Theoretical Foundations of Attachment Theory and Classification of Parent-Child Attachment

The theoretical roots of attachment theory can be traced back to Freud's theory of early experience, but Bowlby (1969) reconstructed it from an evolutionary perspective and proposed the core concept of attachment. Attachment is defined as an innate emotional bond formed between infants and their primary caregivers for survival and safety. Bowlby pointed out that the core value of parent-child attachment is the formation of an internal working model (IWM) : through repeated interactions with caregivers, infants form a relatively stable mental representation of themselves, others and interpersonal relationships, which is the cognitive basis for how people understand and respond to all interpersonal relationships later in life. At the same time, Bowlby emphasized that the internal working model is not static, but has plasticity and can be revised and updated based on life experiences, laying the foundation for research on changes in attachment styles.

Building on Bowlby's theoretical research, Ainsworth et al. (1978) designed the Strange Situation Experiment to observe infants' reactions to novelty, separation from and reunion with caregivers. They divided parent-child

attachment into three basic types according to infants' behavioral traits, which has become the classic classification standard for parent-child attachment. Secure attachment (Type B) accounts for about 66% of typical infants. Infants with this attachment type actively explore unfamiliar environments when caregivers are present, show moderate anxiety when caregivers leave, and actively seek contact and comfort when caregivers return. They can calm down quickly and continue exploring after getting comfort. The formation of secure attachment is closely related to caregivers' high sensitivity and responsive care. Insecure-avoidant attachment (Type A) accounts for about 22% of typical infants. These infants show little interest in caregivers, almost no anxiety when separated, and even avoid or ignore caregivers when reunited, preferring to explore the environment alone. This attachment type is mostly caused by caregivers' long-term neglect and unresponsive care. Insecure-resistant attachment (Type C) accounts for about 12% of typical infants. These infants show obvious anxiety and even crying when separated from caregivers, and display contradictory behaviors when reunited: they both seek contact with caregivers and resist their comfort. They find it hard to calm down for a long time, and their exploration of unfamiliar environments is also significantly reduced. This attachment type is linked to caregivers' inconsistent and contradictory care behaviors.

Extending attachment theory to adult intimate relationships is an important development of the theory. Hazan & Shaver (1987) were the first to propose that adult romantic love is essentially an attachment process, and attachment in adult intimate relationships has the same core functions as infant parent-child attachment: a secure base and a safe haven. On this basis, adult attachment styles are also divided into three types corresponding to infant parent-child attachment: secure, avoidant and anxious-resistant adult attachment. This builds a direct theoretical bridge for researching the link between parent-child attachment and adult intimate relationships.

2. Core Mechanism: Stability and Plasticity of Attachment Style

The dual characteristics of stability and plasticity of attachment style are the core mechanism explaining how early parent-child attachment affects adult intimate relationships across the life cycle. The stability of attachment style is supported by Waters et al.'s (2000) 20-year longitudinal study, which found that 72% of participants maintained the same secure/insecure attachment classification from infancy to early adulthood. This stability stems

from the schema effect of the IWM, which unconsciously guides individuals' interpersonal responses, and the socialization-selection asymmetry: as people age, they actively choose environments and partners that match their attachment style, further strengthening its stability.

Attachment style is not fixed, and its plasticity means early attachment is not the "destiny" of adult intimate relationships. Negative life events (parental divorce, abuse, family mental illness) are the core trigger for attachment style change, with 44% of participants experiencing such events changing their attachment classification in Waters' study. Fraley and Roisman(2019) also confirmed that recent interpersonal experiences (current romantic relationship quality, social support) have a greater impact on adult attachment than early parent-child attachment. Notably, the shift from secure to insecure attachment is easy to trigger by negative events, while the reverse shift requires sustained positive interpersonal experiences.

3. Cultural Specificity of the Influence

The influence of parent-child attachment on adult intimate relationships features "universal core functions and culturally specific expressions". The secure base and safe haven functions of attachment are cross-culturally universal: secure attachment is consistently linked to healthy adult intimate relationships in all cultural contexts, as the need for safe interpersonal bonds is an innate human psychological need (Mesman et al., 2016).

However, the formation and expression of attachment show significant differences between individualistic and collectivist cultures. In Western individualistic cultures, infants' primary attachment figure is usually a single caregiver (mostly the mother), and a caregiver's individual sensitivity is the key to forming secure attachment. In adult intimate relationships, secure individuals prioritize the balance between intimacy and independence, and equal partnership. In collectivist cultures (East Asia, Africa), infants have multiple attachment figures (extended family members), and the overall responsiveness of the caregiver group determines attachment security. In adult intimate relationships, secure individuals focus more on relationship harmony, family integration and mutual responsibility. Classic Western-developed attachment measurement tools also have cultural adaptation problems, and need to be revised to fit collectivist cultural contexts to avoid measurement bias.

4. Methodological Controversies and Key Moderating Factors

Two core methodological controversies limit current re-

search. First, the fragmentation of measurement tools: narrative interviews, self-report scales and behavioral observations measure different dimensions of attachment, with low consistency between results, reducing the comparability of studies (Thompson et al., 2022). Second, the dispute between dimensional and categorical measurement: dimensional measurement treats attachment as a continuous variable of anxiety and avoidance, which is convenient for statistical analysis, while categorical measurement divides attachment into discrete types, which is more consistent with the original attachment theory. The two methods are complementary, and their combination can improve measurement accuracy.

Three key factors moderate the association between parent-child attachment and adult intimate relationships. First, relationship-specific attachment styles: individuals may have different attachment styles in different relationships, so early parent-child attachment only predicts the general tendency of adult intimate relationships, which explains the "weak but significant" influence of early attachment. Second, recent interpersonal experiences, the most important situational moderator, can revise or reshape an individual's IWM quickly. Third, genetic factors, a potential biological moderator: twin studies show about 45% of attachment anxiety variation is explained by genetic factors, though the gene-environment interaction mechanism still needs further research.

Conclusion

This paper systematically analyzes the influence of parent-child attachment on adult intimate relationship patterns, and draws the following core conclusions. First, parent-child attachment exerts a weak but significant and relatively stable influence on adult intimate relationships through shaping the internal working model, with different attachment types leading to distinct interaction patterns in adulthood. Second, the stability and plasticity of attachment style are the core mechanisms of this cross-life-cycle influence: the schema effect and socialization-selection asymmetry maintain the stability of attachment style, while negative life events and recent interpersonal experiences can reshape attachment patterns. Third, the core functions of attachment are cross-culturally universal, but its formation, expression and influence mode show significant cultural specificity between individualistic and collectivist cultures. Current research still has limitations such as fragmented measurement tools and insufficient cross-cultural samples. Future research should focus on developing standardized cross-cultural attachment measurement tools, exploring the gene-environment interaction mechanism, and combining theoretical research with

targeted attachment intervention practices. This study not only enriches the research on the developmental continuity of attachment theory, but also provides a theoretical reference for individuals to adjust their intimate relationship patterns and for clinical intervention of unhealthy intimate relationships.

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