

Reviewing the Research

A Brief Review of *Attachment and development: A prospective, longitudinal study from birth to adulthood*

L. Alan Sroufe

Reviewed by Joan I. Rosenberg, PhD

Sroufe (2005) and colleagues engaged in a 30-year prospective, longitudinal study of the developing person in an effort to test out two of Bowlby's hypotheses, namely that (a) individual differences in the quality or effectiveness of infant-caregiver attachment relationships were predominantly the result of the history of interaction with the caregiver, and (b) variations in attachment quality were the foundation for later differences in personality, and to understand the role of attachment in the life course of an individual. Specifically, Sroufe sought to answer whether these individual patterns of adaptation emerge in a stepwise and coherent manner beginning in infancy. The study he described was initiated in the mid-1970s; participants were 200 urban mothers in Minnesota who were viewed as being at moderate risk of parenting difficulties due to challenges associated with poverty.

Sroufe and his colleagues extended Ainsworth's concept of attachment patterns into what he termed an "organizational perspective on development" (p. 352) noting that "the central feature of behavior is its organization: with other behaviors, with regard to context, and with regard to the salient issues of a particular developmental period" (p. 352). This view of development notes the change in one's level of organization as an individual develops as opposed to one's development being simply the addition of new behaviors. For the purpose of the study, salient issues of each developmental period

were explicated so constructs could be defined at the appropriate level of complexity in order to (a) define and assess functional and nonfunctional patterns of organization, and (b) investigate continuity in individual functioning. Thus, understanding behavior is context driven - the meaning of any behavior depends on when, in what circumstances it occurs, what other behaviors are occurring concurrently, and what function the behavior is serving to promote the ongoing adaptation of the individual.

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A highlight of some of the key findings follows below. First, this study broadly affirmed both Bowlby's initial hypotheses and Ainsworth's empirical findings (see Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), that infants who

were more securely attached had a history of more sensitive and cooperative interactions than those who were anxiously attached. Psychological unavailability was strongly associated with avoidant attachment; likewise, disorganization was strongly predicted by caregiver intrusiveness and maltreatment (e.g., physical abuse and psychological unavailability).

The researchers found that individuals with secure attachment patterns (those able to be effectively dependent on caregivers as a secure base for exploration early in life) were better able to function independently later in life, their behavior was characterized by persistence and flexibility, and they exhibited higher social competence with

significant links between secure attachment and general measures of social competence, age by age, from early childhood to adulthood. By contrast, individuals considered anxious/avoidant or anxious/resistant exhibited more dependent behavior into childhood and beyond. Further, those with resistant histories found it difficult to manage situations of novelty, high stimulation, object mastery and cognitive challenge – exhibiting less active exploratory behavior, less flexibility with problem solving, and greater passivity, helplessness, higher frustration levels, and less persistence in social situations.

Ample evidence was found in support of Sameroff's (2000) assertion that a history of secure attachment is a "promotive" (p. 35) or protective factor regarding pathology especially during periods of high stress. On the basis of results in this study, in particular, researchers found that an avoidant attachment history tends to be more related to conduct problems and that a resistant attachment history is more strongly related to

anxiety disturbances. Researchers theorized that interpersonal alienation and anger is derived from an emotionally unavailable and rejecting caregiver for the avoidant pattern, and that individuals with a resistant pattern adopt a strategy of hypervigilance and hyperattentiveness as the response to an inconsistent caregiver.

Finally, Sroufe notes that regardless of compelling evidence suggesting the predictive value of knowing an early attachment pattern, a non-linear relationship exists. Consequently, one must consider the multiplicity of influences throughout life, including certain aspects of parental support (e.g. guidance and limit setting), sibling, peer, romantic, and work relationships, and the context (e.g. degree of family stress and available social supports) in which these interactions occur. Sroufe suggests that one may think of early attachment patterns as "initiating conditions" (p. 363); certain "structures" may be created, and while these patterns are changeable, the patterns themselves are a factor in subsequent reactions to experience.

Joan I. Rosenberg, Ph.D. is a California-licensed psychologist who earned her doctorate in Counseling Psychology at the University of Missouri, Columbia. She conducts training seminars that apply principles and information from interpersonal neurobiology, cognitive neuroscience and cognitive psychology to clinical training and psychotherapy. She is a core faculty member of the doctoral program in clinical psychology at Phillips Graduate Institute in Encino, CA. Along with the application of interpersonal neurobiology to clinical training, her areas of research interest include clinical training and supervision, diversity and multicultural counseling. She maintains a private practice in West Los Angeles, CA. You can contact Joan at jjr@verizon.net.

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