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Commentary—Attachment in Middle Childhood: Looking Back, Forward, and Within

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Abstract

This commentary discusses the articles that comprise this special issue on attachment in middle childhood. Central to this discussion is the distinction between verbal, strategic, and conscious responses to questionnaires as compared to verbal and nonverbal, automatic and largely unconscious responses to interviews. Both methods have been developed to study attachment in middle childhood, often leading to divergent results. Research going forward should include both types of methods in order to maximize the potential for meaningful research and effective clinical work. Ongoing issues of importance for the field include the need to take account of differential susceptibility theory, culture-specific influences, and possible gender differences. This commentary is organized into three sections—looking within, looking behind, and looking ahead—a tripartite distinction that reflects developmental as well as theoretical and applied perspectives vital to hold in mind when researching attachment in middle childhood. © 2015 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

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> What lies behind us, and what lies ahead of us are tiny matters compared to what lies within.
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> —Attributed to various authors, including Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and an unnamed Wall Street trader

This commentary addresses issues that arise in the study of attachment during middle childhood by looking within, looking behind, and considering what lies ahead for research into this vital preadolescent, post–early childhood period of life.

Looking Within

The epigraph draws attention to the vital importance of the inner world of emotion regulation, thoughts and feelings about who can be trusted, and fundamental coping abilities—the stuff of middle childhood that is the focus of many of the contributions to this fine issue. At the heart of attachment theory is the fundamental assumption that when attachments are going well, psychological health in general is also to be found (Brumariu, Article 3; Moss & Lecompte, Article 5, both this issue).

During the middle childhood years, we become increasingly capable of making social and psychological judgments underpinned by growing metacognitive skills. Attachment research demonstrates that this understanding of mind and emotion is advanced or precocious in children with a history of secure attachments to primary caregivers (Zimmermann & Iwanski, Article 4, this issue). This issue reveals advances in attachment research in middle childhood and the corresponding goal of understanding and promoting psychological well-being in these important years.

The issue reflects diverse perspectives, including reviews of theory and evidence on emotional regulation in middle childhood (Bumariu, Article 3, this issue), the relevance of evolutionary and biological perspectives (Del Giudice, Article 2, this issue), the processing of social or emotional information (Zimmermann & Iwanski, Article 4, this issue), with consideration of both typical and clinical or atypical pathways (Moss & Lecompte, Article 5, this issue). In addition, the extent to which the teacher–child relationship may be seen as an attachment relationship is considered (Verschueren, Article 6, this issue). To the extent that children see teachers as bigger, stronger, and wiser than they see themselves and also to the extent that they rely on them as a secure base or safe haven, then teachers may be considered attachment figures—but this is much less likely to be the case as children advance through middle childhood toward adolescence.

Article 1 by Bosmans and Kerns provides a useful road map to understand contributions to date and directions that researchers may follow going forward (echoed in diverse and overlapping ways by all other contributions to this issue). Most valuable, perhaps, is their reliance on the dual theory perspective that contrasts strategic (conscious) with automatic

(unconscious) processing of information. This distinction serves as way of acknowledging, and valuing, the different research perspectives on attachment in middle childhood—that is, those that rely on questionnaires completed by youth, parents, peers, or teachers, and those that rely on interviews collected from youth themselves, parents, teachers, or others vitally involved in the child's life. With the former method, researchers rely on deliberate or conscious self-reported responses to the carefully conceived language of *others* as it appears on questionnaires (e.g., the Security Scale) or questionnaires tapping into emotion regulation strategies. In contrast, some interview methodologies (Child Attachment Interview [CAI], Friends and Family Interview, or Late CAI—see Article 4) are based on the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) and are aligned with it in the aim of surprising the unconscious and thereby accessing the inner world of the developing self. Correspondingly, the FFI has, in longitudinal work with low-risk, typically developing children, been associated (backward) to infant–mother and infant–father attachment and to parents' responses to the AAI (Steele & Steele, 2005). In this sense, it appears that automatic unconscious emotion regulation strategies, operative in infancy (and observable in the Strange Situation Procedure [SSP]), may remain more or less stable through 12 years of age when children's development follows a typical trajectory and when interviews are used to tap into these attachment strategies in middle childhood. Interview questions of most relevance appear to be ones that challenge children to think about emotional distress and ambivalent or mixed feelings, for example, "What do you do when you are upset?" and "What do you like most, and what do you like least" in relation to self, peers, siblings, and parents. Questions such as these capture automatic (unconscious) strategies as opposed to deliberate (and conscious) verbal responses (which are better captured via questionnaires). Different information typically arises from each method. Importantly, as Bosmans and Kerns emphasize, both types of information are relevant, and the experience of completing a survey is, like the interview, an experience that foretells many later encounters (e.g., job interviews), so it is good preparation for the future. In addition, with respect to mental health problems or the experience of adversity, a questionnaire is often a productive and nonthreatening way of eliciting information from a youth (who may otherwise be governed by shame and lead to underreporting of experiences of adversity). The sooner we can identify young people in middle childhood who are experiencing attachment insecurities or mental health troubles, the earlier a remedy can be sought (via therapeutic work with parents, pediatricians, or schools) and found, as problems that emerge in middle childhood often continue into adulthood.

Looking Behind

Attachment during infancy and early childhood is readily observable, by way of seeing and hearing how children behave on reunion following an

actual (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) or imagined separation, as in story stems depicting a dilemma when the child is asked "Show me and tell me what happens next." The SSP (Ainsworth et al., 1978) is the gold standard measure of attachment, because of both its wide use and its previous validation across cultures.

Attachment is the central developmental challenge of the first 20 months of life (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005). Attachment to mother, father, and other primary caregivers remains important throughout middle childhood as the background to psychosocial development. At this time, relations with peers and teachers are the primary area of psychosocial development. In early childhood, there is the challenge (related to attachment) of developing a positive sense of self, of gender membership, and of belonging in one's wider family and social group (e.g., relations with grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, neighbors). With the transition to school comes the requirement to coordinate goals and plans with other children and new adults (i.e., teachers). Will earliest (and ongoing) attachments to primary caregivers impact these new relationships vital to child development? There is a wealth of evidence in support of past attachments remaining an ongoing influence, yet there is also evidence in support of new relationships subverting, or compensating for, earlier ones. The compensation narrative (e.g., positive restorative experiences) is the more hopeful one to be researched and understood, so that such experiences can be promoted. Yet the alternative narrative about adversities (e.g., domestic violence or traumatic loss) that can subvert attachment and healthy psychological development must also be studied so that their pernicious impacts can be prevented.

According to Del Giudice (Article 2, this issue), children growing up in more or less stable and predictable circumstances experience ongoing adherence to early-learned patterns of interaction *because* the early lessons continue to be a reliable source for predicting how others are likely to behave and the extent to which children can rely on others for support. Article 2 provides insight into the meaning for children of social contexts that are threatening and highly volatile. In such contexts, strategies and automatic (hidden) assumptions about the world must remain in flux, able to change quickly, in response to rapidly changing (very likely threatening) circumstances. The unstable context may be one that becomes significantly more or less safe, and knowing that the safety may change permits an understanding by researchers of what is called lawful or meaningful discontinuity of attachment. A move from security to insecurity should be anticipated when the context becomes suddenly threatening, while a move from insecurity to security should be anticipated when threats recede and support pervades. To the extent that attachment security is grounded in instinctual component behavior systems present in newborn humans (and other animals), seen in reaching and holding on behaviors, then attachment security is inherently self-righting. This is because the experience of ruptures becoming reliably

repaired leads to hope, trust, and joy. And, accordingly, we should more often see moves toward, rather than away from, attachment security. Carefully planned longitudinal research can help further our understanding of these change processes, which so far have been more often speculated upon than directly observed.

But what measures of attachment should be relied on in research that includes children who are no longer infants or toddlers? Moss and Lecompte (Article 5, this issue) have relied heavily on the modified SSP (essentially applying the Ainsworth et al., 1978, procedure to children through 5 or 6 years of age) and assembled a large body of evidence showing that continuing to observe children's behavioral responses to separation and reunion is meaningful with respect to identifying those children who rely on disorganized (controlling–caregiving or punitive) strategies. And it is now well established that a child who is disorganized with a caregiver is highly likely to be emotionally dysregulated with peers and teachers (Brumariu, Article 3, this issue). With respect to the typical insecure patterns of attachment (avoidant versus resistant) as opposed to secure patterns, the modified SSP is much less useful. So, overall, it must be concluded that, in choosing a measure of attachment suitable to middle childhood, more may be gained by looking forward to adolescence and adulthood and embracing an interview methodology, as Zimmermann and Iwanski (Article 4, this issue) report doing. Also age appropriate are questionnaire self-report techniques. Both interviews and questionnaires depend on the age-appropriate task of asking young people what they think and feel.

Looking Ahead

Emerging issues in the field concern the "new" theory of differential susceptibility positing that not all children are similarly affected by their caregiving environments; rather, some children are greatly sensitive to or impacted by the caregiving context and other children are impacted hardly at all. The search for valid measures of this biologically based characteristic (distinct from but related to temperament), and no doubt variable in its expression, will be the subject of ongoing research for some years to come. This line of inquiry, which must include longitudinal research designs that span middle childhood, is certain to modify and illuminate our understanding of risk and resilience, as it will show if the child most at risk is also the child most likely to show resilience. For those children biologically primed to be very sensitive to the caregiving context, attachments should change readily as the context changes; for other children not very sensitive to the caregiving context, attachments may not change much at all over time.

A further important developmental research issue (addressed in the commentary by Bin-Bin Chen in this issue) is whether findings observed in a study of one cultural group (defined by socioeconomic, linguistic, or ethnic status) also apply to other groups. After more than 50 years of

research, it can be fairly argued that secure attachments are universal. That is, wherever attachment has been studied across the globe, in places where there is no recent history of war or natural disaster and a good-enough environment can be assumed, secure attachment is observed 55% or more of the time. This percentage of security remains the norm across childhood, into adolescence and adulthood, and mental ill health is strongly associated with insecurity across the life span. Where cultural variations impact attachment is in respect of insecurity (e.g., in northern Europe, avoidance is more common than resistance, while in Japan and Israel, resistance is more common that avoidance).

Finally, Del Giudice (Article 2, this issue) summarizes the effects of gender on attachment questionnaire (but not interview) data insofar as girls/women trend significantly toward anxiety and boys/men trend toward avoidance—differences not seen in infancy, so arguably they are not of biological origin. In early childhood in respect to doll-play story stem responses, attachment security is a leveler when it comes to these gender differences; that is, 5-year-old boys and girls with a history of a secure attachment to mother showed similar midlevel prosocial responses, but girls with an insecure history showed significantly heightened levels of "sweetness" and boys with an insecure history showed significant deficits (Steele et al., 2003). In other words, attachment security appears to overwrite the dictates of stereotypical culture-based or gender-based assumptions. This finding suggests that attachment security is very much about autonomy—that is, freedom to explore and freedom to relate, coping well with risk, and embracing opportunities with joy.

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