The Nature and Importance of Attachment Relationships to Parents and Peers During Adolescence

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The nature and quality of adolescents' attachments to peers and parents were assessed with the newly developed Inventory of Adolescent Attachments. The relative influence on measures of self-esteem and life satisfaction of relations with peers and with parents was then investigated in a hierarchical regression model. The sample consisted of 213 adolescents ranging from 12 to 19 years of age. Two hypotheses were tested: (1) The quality of perceived attachments both to parents and peers would be related to well-being, and (2) the quality of parental relationships would be a more powerful predictor of well-being than would the quality of peer relationships. Confirming the study's hypotheses, the perceived quality of the adolescents' relationships to both peers and parents, their frequency of utilization of peers, and their degree of negative life change were significantly related to both measures of well-being. The quality of attachment to parents was significantly more powerful than that to peers in predicting well-being. In addition, quality of attachment to parents showed a moderating effect under conditions of high life stress on the measures of self-esteem. The study suggests that it is useful to consider the quality of attachments to significant others as an important variable throughout the life span.

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INTRODUCTION

There has been increasing interest in life-span approaches to the study of attachments (Kahn and Antonucci, 1980; Lerner and Ryff, 1978). Investigations in infancy have shown that individual differences in infant-parent attachment can be reliably assessed and demonstrate substantial stability during the second year of life (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Waters, 1978).

Recent reviews also have shown that the existence and perceived quality of intimate relationships during the adult years affect such outcomes as mental health, physical health, and reactions to traumatic life events (Gottlieb, 1981; Mueller, 1980). In addition to showing a direct relationship between attachments and health, a growing body of literature suggests that attachments may also buffer the relationship between stress and illness (Nuckolls et al., 1972) and job loss (Gore, 1978). Henderson (1977) has shown the efficacy of using Bowlby's model of attachment (1969, 1973a, 1973b) to explain such phenomena.

While these research domains have demonstrated the crucial nature of attachments in both infancy and adulthood, little research has focused on the effects of intimate attachments in adolescence (Hill, 1980). In this report, we examine the differential effects of the perceived quality of adolescents' relationships with parents and peers in relation to their self-concept. These relationships are examined for both early and middle adolescence.

While substantial change occurs in adolescence, questions surrounding the extent and nature of these changes have focused on two related topics: (1) viewing adolescence as a period of significant turmoil versus one of gradual transition, and (2) determining the relative impact/influence of peers and parents during the adolescent process. Beginning with G. Stanley Hall (1904) and supported by psychoanalytic theory (Freud, 1958; Blos, 1972), adolescence has been characterized as a period of intense intrapsychic struggle between the dependency needs of childhood and the striving for independence and autonomy. Psychoanalytic theory posits a renewal of intense Oedipal feelings from early childhood which are resolved through the use of particular defense mechanisms (Freud, 1966) and a shift in libidinal focus from one's parents to relationships within the peer group. However, a series of recent longitudinal studies has found adolescence to be a period of gradual change that is not defined by either significant instability or by regression of ego functions (Bandura, 1969; Douvan and Adelson, 1966; Offer and Offer, 1975; Rutter, 1980). Adelson and Doehrman (1980) suggested that theories of storm and stress were usually supported by clinical case studies of pathological adolescents, and such evidence was inappropriately generalized to normal adolescents.