Men and Women’s Attachment and Contact Patterns with Parents During the First Year of College

Christina F. Sorokou and Carol S. Weissbrod

Attending a university involves change and transition and an opportunity to study older adolescents’ attachment. The current study explored potential gender differences in both older adolescents’ need- and nonneed-based interactions with parents and their perceptions of attachment quality. Results indicated that although females did not initiate significantly more need-based contact with parents than males, they received significantly more need-based contact than males that was initiated by their parents. On the other hand, females both initiated and received nonneed-based contact with parents more than males. Consistent with attachment theory, parent–child need- and nonneed-based interactions were related to one’s perceived quality of attachment. Results indicated that adolescent attachment involves both need- and nonneed-based parent–adolescent interactions. The pattern of findings suggests that adolescent males and females may show attachment in different ways.

KEY WORDS: gender; attachment; adolescence.

Infancy attachment research has established that a secure attachment results from the reciprocal and sensitively contingent interaction between a child and his/her caregiver (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969, 1973) and is fundamentally related to the infant’s security and survival needs (Bowlby, 1969, 1982). Indeed, researchers have found that a secure attachment style lies at the core of the healthy development of children’s social, psychological, and physical well being (see Bornstein, 2002, for a review). Adolescent and young adult attachment on the other hand, where separation usually takes place as a result of the child’s increasing autonomy, has been less frequently studied.

Unlike in infancy and childhood when attachment is observed by assessing a child’s separation and reunion behaviors (Ainsworth et al., 1978), assessment in adolescent attachment requires tapping into both the cognitive–affective dimension of attachment (i.e., the degree of mutual trust, communication quality, and conversely, degree of alienation that exist(s) between the individual and his/her parent(s) (Armsden and Greenberg, 1987; Parkes and Stevenson-Hinde, 1982)), as well as the behavioral dimensions of attachment (i.e., the frequency with which one utilizes the attachment figure(s) for support in times of need (Parkes and Stevenson-Hinde, 1982)), (Main and Goldwyn, 1998). An individual’s perceived quality of attachment has been found to influence his/her need-based (proximity and support seeking) behaviors (Armsden and Greenberg, 1987; Paterson et al., 1994), self-disclosure tendencies, well-being, and development and adjustment during transition periods (Armsden and Greenberg, 1987; Fischer and Good, 1998; Kenny, 1990; Lewinsohn et al., 1994; Pavlidis and McCauley, 2001; Rudolf, 1997; Stroufe, 2001; Vasquez et al., 2001; Waters et al., 2000; Waters and Cummings, 2002). Of interest in the present study is whether late adolescent attachment can also be characterized by nonneed-based contact seeking.
Bowlby (1973) noted that in adolescence attachment takes the form of autonomy and independence with maintenance of warm and supportive relationships. Research has found that depressed adolescents are more likely to perceive their relationships with their parents as being low in parental warmth and family cohesion (Armsden et al., 1991; Barrera and Carrison-Jones, 1992). It has been proposed that during times of separation, individuation can be most effectively attained through a balance between adolescent–parent connectedness and separateness (Grotevant and Cooper, 1985; Olson et al., 1983, 1992). Thus, postchildhood attachment can be construed as having components of proximity and support seeking in times of need (need-based contact) and of seeking to touch base to maintain the emotional closeness (nonneed-based contact). Consequently, contact patterns such as telephoning, e-mailing, visiting, etc., at times of nonneed, either initiated by the adolescent or by the parent(s) (e.g., for the purposes of touching base), may be thought of as a means by which parents and their adolescents connect to each other and maintain attachment.

Of interest in attachment in older samples, is research on gender socialization that has documented that boys and girls may show attachment differently (Rubin and Martin, 1998). In regard to the cognitive–affective dimension of attachment, Armsden and Greenberg (1987) found that females report feeling closer to their mother than their father, but there were no gender differences in perceived quality of attachment. Kenny (1990) found no significant gender differences in the overall perceived quality of parental attachment, but females perceived that their parents provided emotional support more than males. In 1991, Kenny and Donaldson found that females were significantly more attached to both their mother and father than males, and they reported higher scores than males in perceived parental encouragement of autonomy and emotional support.

It might be expected that older adolescent males and females could differ on various dimensions of attachment. For example, learned behaviors such as emotional expression have been said to be encouraged more in females than in males (Snyder et al., 2000). Females have been found to use more direct emotional communication strategies and to hold a connected-self orientation in relation to their parents, whereas males have been found to hold a separate-self orientation in relation to their parents (Anders, 2002). When in need, females have been found to be more willing to self-disclose than males (Dindia and Allen, 1992; Papini et al., 1991; Paterson et al., 1994) and receive more social support than their male counterparts (Turner, 1994).

The current study explored attachment in a freshman college-aged sample, a time of physical separation and exploration of a new environment (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Kenny, 1987, 1990). To study freshman attachment, the current study operationalized and assessed attachment as consisting of both need-based contact (proximity and support seeking in times of need) and nonneed-based contact (the desire to touch base to maintain emotional connectedness). Gender differences in contact patterns were explored. The study also assessed men and women’s cognitive–affective dimension of attachment (perceived quality of attachment) and how it relates to measures of need- and nonneed-based contact, as a way of understanding whether older adolescent males and females show attachment similarly.

Therefore, the following hypotheses were made: First, it was hypothesized that females would be more likely to initiate more need-based and nonneed-based contact than their male counterparts. Second, it was hypothesized that females would receive more need- and nonneed-based contact from their parents than their male counterparts. Third, as a corollary to hypotheses 1 and 2, it was expected that there would be a significant relationship between student- and parent-initiated need- and nonneed-based contact. This study also explored the question of whether participants’ perceived quality of attachment would be positively associated with both need- and nonneed-based student initiated contact.

METHOD

Subjects

Participants were male (n = 43) and female (n = 45) freshman college students who were experiencing their first year-long, yet intermittent, separation from their parents. All students were single, born and raised in the United States, with an average age of 18.16 years (SD = .43). All students were from 2 (biological) parent households in which the parents were married an average of 24.1 years (SD = 2.68). The majority of participants (76%) were Caucasian.

Measures

Informed consent was obtained from each participant. Participants completed a questionnaire packet that was comprised of 2 measures: a measure related to perceived quality of parent attachment (IPPA; Armsden and Greenberg, 1987) and a measure assessing need- and