COMMENTARIES

Assessment of Individual Differences in Adult Attachment

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Other commentators have discussed at length Hazan and Shaver's main thesis that attachment theory can provide an integrative framework for the study of close relationships. I would like to focus on a more specific issue that I believe is critical to the progress of theory and research on adult attachment—the assessment of individual differences. I agree with Hazan and Shaver's position that more attention needs to be devoted to exploring normative attachment phenomena, but the fact remains that virtually all work in adult attachment has been undertaken within an individual-differences framework. And, although I too would like to believe that attachment theory "does not stand or fall with the success of any individual-difference measure," the importance of measurement issues to the progress of research in the field cannot be underestimated. Although the validity of the theory itself may not depend on the quality of measurement, our ability as researchers to test the theory and to accumulate convincing evidence of its usefulness is closely tied to the quality of our measures.

As pointed out in the target article, it was Ainsworth's development of the Strange Situation procedure that first opened the door for the empirical study of Bowlby's theoretical work. Likewise, Main's development of the Adult Attachment Interview to measure adults' mental representations of their own childhoods has greatly advanced research on the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns (e.g., Fonagy, H. Steele, & M. Steele, 1991). And, more recently, the short self-report measure of adult attachment styles used by Hazan and Shaver (1987) in their seminal article on love as an attachment process has facilitated a burgeoning new area of research. In each case, the development of new methods of assessment has not only expanded the domain of attachment research, but the research in turn has led to greater conceptual clarity and further theoretical development.

Before attachment researchers charge ahead into new areas of investigation, I believe it would be useful to stop for a moment and critically assess our measurement approaches. In this commentary, I do not attempt to contrast the different methods of assessing adult attachment or to argue for a particular assessment approach (for discussions of these questions, see Bartholomew, 1993; Griffin & Bartholomew, in press-a, in press-b). Rather, I raise some critical questions in this area and illustrate the importance of these questions by considering some of the findings presented by Hazan and Shaver in their overview of adult attachment research.

First, what is an attachment style? This is perhaps the most fundamental (and thorny) question in the field of adult attachment. In the childhood literature, attachment patterns typically refer to how infants organize their attachment behavior with respect to a particular caregiver (e.g., Ainsworth, 1982). In contrast, Hazan and Shaver define adult attachment either in terms of internal representations or models that guide interpersonal behavior and information processing or in terms of characteristic strategies that individuals use to maintain felt security. These two approaches to conceptualizing attachment styles are doubtless closely linked, both in theory and practice. In both cases, there appears to be an implicit assumption that attachment styles are relatively enduring characteristics of individuals that transcend particular relationships and that act to structure the quality of interaction in particular close relationships. To date, however, there is limited empirical evidence of either consistency over time or consistency across relationships to support this assumption. Obvious alternate possibilities to a dispositional interpretation of attachment styles are that attachment styles reflect experiences in specific close relationships or current person-situation interactions (cf. Simpson, 1990). In addition, other crucial questions pertaining to the definition of attachment styles remain unaddressed. To name just a few: To what extent are working models of attachment consciously held? How specific or general are these models? Is there a hierarchy of attachment models? Under what conditions are attachment models and/or strategies likely to be activated? What are the critical dimensions or variables underlying individual differences in adult attachment?

Different measures of adult attachment differ in systematic ways that reflect different conceptions of adult
attachment patterns. For example, self-report measures rely on subjects’ abilities to accurately report their expectations and experiences in intimate relationships (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987), whereas interview or projective measures do not assume the same degree of conscious awareness on the part of subjects (e.g., Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Measures also differ in the content domains assessed, some focusing on representations of adult–adult relationships (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987) and some focusing on representations of early relationships in the family (e.g., Kobak & Sceery, 1988). In addition, measures differ in the specificity with which attachment representations are defined—from measures assessing the quality of attachment in specific relationships (e.g., Kobak & Hazan, 1991) to measures looking at attachment representations across intimate peer relationships in general (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Last, some measures assess discrete attachment categories (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987), others yield continuous ratings of discrete patterns (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), and yet others assess dimensions hypothesized to underlie individual differences in attachment (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990).

This abundance of approaches to measuring adult attachment patterns reflects the generativity of researchers in this field. Individual studies, however, have typically used just one form of assessment (and most commonly a self-report method). Moreover, I am aware of no published work that formally tested the construct validity of any of these individual-difference measures (including convergent and discriminant validity) and of little work that directly compared different methods of measurement (for exceptions, see Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan, Shaver, & Tobey, 1991). As a result, it is becoming increasingly difficult to integrate the growing body of findings on adult attachment. In order to illustrate the importance of careful consideration of the constructs assessed by various measures and also of comparison of results obtained with different measures, in the next sections I briefly review three sets of findings presented by Hazan and Shaver—continuity, relationship functioning, and gender differences.

**Continuity of Attachment Patterns**

Hazan and Shaver suggest that secure attachment patterns may be more stable than insecure attachment patterns and that, correspondingly, change may be more likely in the direction of security than insecurity. Although theoretically plausible, closer consideration of measurement issues suggests that these conclusions may be premature. First, the use of categorical measures to assess stability introduces the possibility of differential base rates affecting stability results. For instance, Egeland and Farber’s (1984) findings are cited as evidence of greater stability of secure attachment in early childhood: Seventy-four percent of secure children at Time 1 maintained their secure status over 6 months, whereas only 45% of avoidant children and 37% of ambivalent children showed stability. However, based on the percentage of secure children in the sample at Time 2, the stability expected of the secure group by chance alone would be 55%; in contrast, the expected stability of the avoidant group by chance would be just 22% and of the ambivalent group just 23%. Thus, it can be misleading to directly compare stability results for groups with divergent base rates.

Categorical measures may also have other disadvantages for use in exploring continuity. They fail to take into account potential movement of subjects within categories (i.e., an individual could become more or less secure but could still be classified within the secure group). Conversely, categorical measures may be unduly influenced by small changes that could lead subjects to change groups (i.e., an individual who is marginally secure and secondarily ambivalent at Time 1 could shift slightly to become marginally ambivalent and secondarily secure at Time 2).

Interestingly, the few studies that have obtained test–retest correlations of continuous measures of adult attachment have not indicated greater consistency over time of secure than insecure patterns (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990; Scharfe & Bartholomew, in press; Shaver & Brennan, 1992). Moreover, new studies that have tested mean differences in continuous attachment ratings over time have not found any tendency to move toward greater security (Feeney, Noller, & Callan, in press; Scharfe & Bartholomew, in press). The claim that change is more likely in the direction of security is also inconsistent with the finding, convincingly shown by Hazan and Shaver (1987) themselves, that the percentage of adults in each of the attachment patterns is comparable to the percentages found with infants. If there is a tendency toward change in the direction of security, the proportion of secure individuals would increase with age. In fact, if the relative proportions of changes toward security and insecurity reported by Hazan and Hutt (1991) were taken at face value, we might expect virtually everyone to be securely attached by middle adulthood.

**Relationship Functioning**

In their review of the correlates of insecure attachment patterns, Hazan and Shaver imply that insecurity of attachment may lead to relationship difficulties, including relatively high rates of relationship dissolution.
However, the studies they cite to support these claims are potentially compromised by reliance on self-report measures of attachment and on cross-sectional research designs. There are reasons to believe that self-report measures may be strongly influenced by the current functioning of romantic relationships, and a case can even be made that such attachment measures assess little more than current relationship dynamics. First, studies have consistently found that subjects in steady romantic relationships are disproportionately likely to categorize themselves as secure on self-report attachment measures, with as many as 90% being judged secure in some studies (e.g., Howes, Markman, & Lindahl, 1992; Senchak & Leonard, 1992). Based on these findings, some researchers have suggested that secure subjects may be more likely to establish and maintain intimate relationships (e.g., Feeney et al., in press; Senchak & Leonard, 1992). In contrast, studies relying on interview measures have not found a disproportionate number of secure married individuals (e.g., Fonagy et al., 1991). A recent study in my laboratory using both self-report and interview measures suggested a systematic bias in self-report ratings in established couples: More than 80% of subjects rated themselves as primarily secure in their primary relationship, whereas only approximately 50% were rated as primarily secure by trained judges on the basis of a semi-structured interview (Bartholomew & Scharfe, 1993).

In addition, self-report attachment ratings may be, at least in part, confounded with measures of relationship functioning. Hammond and Fletcher (1991) found that relationship satisfaction predicted changes in attachment ratings over time but that attachment ratings did not predict changes in relationship satisfaction. Moreover, the high correlations between attachment and satisfaction obtained in Feeney et al.'s (in press) study of newlyweds (in some cases over .6) call into question the discriminant validity of the two constructs. Feeney et al.'s additional finding that relationship characteristics were more strongly related to one's own attachment scores than to those of relationship partners may suggest that the attachment patterns that individuals bring to a relationship are more important in determining their subsequent feelings than are the attachment patterns of their partners (see also Simpson, 1990). However, this pattern of results could also be explained by shared method variance. Although different patterns of correlations between the various insecure attachment patterns and measures of relationship functioning suggest that attachment ratings are not reducible to relationship satisfaction, there is no evidence to suggest that they are not primarily a reflection of emergent properties of the relationship itself. Moreover, these problems are not unique to self-report methods: Interview and other assessment methods may also be influenced by the quality of subjects' current close relationships.

Similarly, Hazan and Shaver's (1987) finding that insecure patterns were associated with a history of shorter relationship duration does not necessarily indicate that insecure attachment puts individuals at risk for relationship dissolution. It may be that individuals who have had less relationship "success" come to rate themselves as insecurely attached. Notably, in the one prospective study of relationship stability within an attachment framework, the highest rates of stability were reported by ambivalent women (Kirkpatrick & Davis, in press). Moreover, some studies using only individuals currently involved in romantic relationships have not reported a consistent association between attachment patterns and relationship duration (e.g., Senchak & Leonard, 1992).

Hazan and Shaver further suggest that there is evidence that mates are selected based on matching of complementary attachment patterns. In order to test this hypothesis, it would be necessary to assess the attachment patterns of subjects before they enter romantic relationships and then compare the patterns of partners in newly formed relationships. I know of no work in the attachment field that has undertaken such a design. Although Kirkpatrick and Davis (in press) followed couples over 3 years, their results are only relevant to relationship maintenance and not mate selection. To interpret findings indicating matching on attachment patterns at one point in time as indicative of mate selection is especially problematic given that there is little evidence that attachment patterns of subjects in romantic relationships existed before involvement in the relationships under question. It should also be noted that some studies have found limited or no evidence of partner matching on attachment ratings (e.g., Feeney et al., in press; Howes et al., 1992; Simpson, 1990).

Of course, none of the results reviewed disconfirms the hypothesis that attachment patterns existing before relationship involvement predict both later attachment patterns and relationship functioning. However, given the current state of knowledge, a more cautious interpretation of the data may be wise.

**Gender Differences in Attachment Patterns**

Hazan and Shaver point out that there are no reliable gender differences on their self-report measure of adult attachment. However, gender differences are evident on measures assessing four rather than three patterns of adult attachment (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz,
1991; Brennan et al, 1991; Harrison-Greer, 1991). In addition, there is a growing body of evidence of gender differences in the outcomes associated with the different attachment patterns (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney et al., in press; Simpson, 1990). Again, this is an area in which greater understanding of the conceptual overlap between different measures is necessary to reconcile conflicting results.

More important, Hazan and Shaver interpret the research that does not reveal gender differences as support for Bowlby’s claim that all human beings, regardless of gender, have an inborn need for security. This interpretation of the existence (or nonexistence) of gender differences would seem to indicate confusion regarding the constructs assessed by the measure in question. As described by Hazan and Shaver, all adult attachment patterns are hypothesized to be based on an underlying need for felt security, and the patterns differ only in the strategies characteristically used for maintaining felt security. Thus, whether or not there are gender differences in the proportions of individuals using the various strategies is irrelevant to the question of the hypothesized universality of the inborn need for felt security. Moreover, that gender differences have not been observed in infants is relevant to the adult field only if we assume that adult attachment patterns are permanently formed in infancy. Adult attachment measures such as Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) self-report questionnaire operationalize attachment styles in terms of current expectations and experiences in close relationships, not in terms of the representations formed in early childhood. The degree to which there may be continuity in attachment patterns from early childhood to adulthood is an empirical question that has not yet been addressed. In addition, Bowlby (1980) saw the formative period in the establishment of attachment patterns extending through adolescence. Thus, any experiences throughout this period would be expected to affect the formation of attachment-related representations. To the extent that males and females experience different socialization pressures, especially in relation to the regulation of affect in close relationships, we might expect gender differences in their resulting attachment patterns.

Conclusions

I hope I have demonstrated the importance of considering potential limitations of particular measurement approaches in interpreting research findings. In addition, I have pointed out instances in which different measures have yielded different substantive conclusions (and many other examples could be cited). Thus, I would urge researchers in the field of adult attachment to clearly specify the constructs under study, to systematically validate their attachment measures, and to use multiple indicators whenever possible (see Griffin & Bartholomew, in press-a, in press-b).

Last, I emphasize that theory and measurement are inextricably linked. For example, adult attachment models identifying different numbers of primary attachment patterns or strategies are based on different conceptual analyses. Hazan and Shaver’s analysis of individual differences in attachment is based on the logical possibility of three perceptions of caretaking (consistently positive, consistently negative, inconsistent) resulting in three potential patterns of adult attachment. In contrast, Sperling and Berman (1991) derived four attachment patterns from an analysis of the interaction of two hypothesized relational drives (affiliation and aggression). Similarly, in my work I have derived four attachment patterns based on a conceptual analysis of two hypothesized dimensions underlying attachment representations (models of the self and models of hypothetical others; Bartholomew, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Thus, some of the issues that Hazan and Shaver appear to relegate to questions of measurement can in fact have significant theoretical implications.

In conclusion, although I agree with the spirit of Hazan and Shaver’s call for a greater focus on normative attachment phenomenon and for further work integrating other approaches to studying close relationships, I wonder whether some housecleaning may be in order first. In my opinion, continued empirical and theoretical progress in the field of adult attachment will only be ensured if researchers begin to pay more attention to measurement issues and scrupulously avoid the uncritical adoption of any one measure as the indicator of adult attachment.

Note

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References


**Attachment and Close Relationships: An Individual-Difference Perspective**

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As developmental psychologists studying attachment relationships in infancy and childhood (Belsky & Cassidy, in press), we have found it fascinating to watch the increased applications of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973, 1980, 1969/1982) to the study of close relationships in adulthood (e.g., Ainsworth, 1989; Collins & Read, 1990; Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988; Weiss, 1982). Hazan and Shaver’s promising analysis of how attachment theory can serve as an organizational framework for research on close relationships (actually romantic relationships), in concert with their own and others’ empirical studies on this topic, makes it not inconceivable that, some time in the future, attachment research on such relationships might actually overshadow the work in infancy and childhood that gave rise to it. Although such growth would attest to the fundamental and enduring contribution of attachment theory to the field of psychology, a far more desired goal is the eventual (and, we hope, inevitable) linkage of these two schools of attachment inquiry. Only this would permit the testing of fundamental propositions of attachment theory concerning continuity and discontinuity in attachment relationships within and across generations.