

Attachment as Emotion Regulation in Adolescents

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Introduction

In infancy, attachment is assessed via the Strange Situation Procedure, whereas in adolescence cognitive development allows for self-report measures to be applied.

According to the two-levels approach of internal working models (IWM), these two kinds of measures aim at different organizational levels of the attachment system. These two levels, the declarative and the procedural ones, develop according to different time schedules and thus might not be correlated.

Indeed, studies so far failed to show *heterotypic* longitudinal stability of the attachment system.

The present study aimed at assessing attachment in adolescence at the behavioral level so that the attachment behavioral system could be tested for *homotypic* stability from infancy to adolescence.

For this purpose, a standardized emotion-eliciting dyadic situation was designed to score for emotional expression and regulation (analogous to the Strange Situation in infancy).

Research Questions

I. Attachment Behavior as Emotion Regulation:

- Can attachment behavior be elicited in adolescents?
- Is the dyadic "Talkshow" situation an adequate method for inducing negative emotions (as a prerequisite for attachment behavior)?
- Can the adolescents' emotion regulation strategies, as observed in the "Talkshow" situation with their mothers, be interpreted in terms of attachment behavior?

II. Attachment at the Behavioral and Representational Levels:

- Is attachment at the behavioral level related to
 - *the attachment behavior as reported in the Attachment Interview for Late Childhood (BISK)?*
 - *the attachment representation?*
 - *emotional openness in the interview?*
 - *coherence of speech in the interview?*

Method

Participants:

The sample consisted of 96 children and their mothers (for current results, N=91) from the Regensburg Longitudinal Study IV. The children were 12 years of age; gender being equally distributed (n=46 female, 50,5%).

Behavior Assessment:

To assess attachment in adolescence

- at the behavioral level
- in an age-appropriate way,

an emotion-eliciting standardized situation was designed: The dyadic attachment situation "Talkshow" (Zimmermann, 2004).

Emotion induction by

- instructions (fear stimuli)
- self-presentation in front of an audience

Measures:

- I. Coding system for event-based scoring of attachment behavior in the "Talkshow" situation.
- II. Bindungsinterview für die Späte Kindheit, BISK (Zimmermann & Scheuerer-Engelsch, 2000).

Categories:

- Emotion
- Regulation
- Effectiveness

5-Point-Scales:

- Attachment Representation to mother and father
- Attachment Strategy

7-Point-Scale:

- Emotional Openness

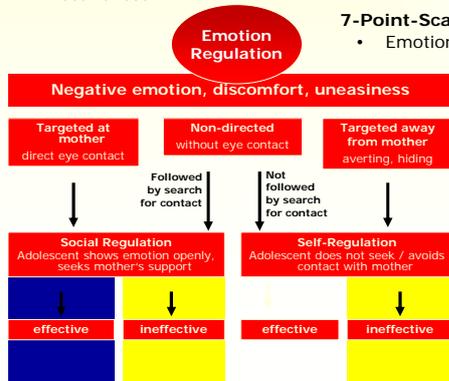


Figure 1: Flow chart of coding for attachment behavior, i.e., emotion expression and regulation, in the Talkshow situation.

Results

Emotion Induction:

All 91 adolescents showed negative emotionality **at least once** with a mean frequency of 12 (SD=7,8) and a maximum of 42.

Emotional Expression and Regulation:

- The direct communication of negative emotion was positively correlated with effective emotion regulation (.32**),
- whereas for both diffuse and averted/hidden emotional expression the correlation was negative (-.23* resp. -.39***).

Attachment at the Behavioral and Representational Levels:

- The communication of negative emotion, direct as well as indirect, correlated with validly self-reported secure attachment *strategy* (BISK),
- **but not** with the *representation* of the mother as being available and supportive.
- Directly addressing the mother can be interpreted as a **social** emotion regulation (ER) strategy (as opposed to emotional self-regulation).
- Social ER was positively correlated with attachment security in the interview. So was the **effectiveness** of regulation.
- Observed **behavioral avoidance and security** corresponded to the interview measure. **Ambivalent** emotion regulation behavior showed no linear trend,
- i.e., support seeking at the behavioral level is indicative of a secure attachment strategy **only if** the contact helps the adolescent to effectively regulate his emotions.
- Insecurely attached adolescents (BISK) were **less likely** to seek their mothers' help in the "Talkshow" situation and **more likely** to remain **dyregulated** throughout the interaction.

Emotion in Talkshow	BISK	
	Representation of Mother	Attachment Strategy
Directed	.14	.29**
Undirected	-.10	-.25*
Averted / hidden	-.08	-.13

Table 3: Attachment (BISK) and Communication of Negative Emotions (Talkshow)

Regulation in Talkshow	BISK	
	Representation of Mother	Attachment Strategy
Social	.08	.24*
Self	-.08	-.24*
Effective	.21*	.32**
Ineffective	-.21*	-.32**

Table 4: Attachment (BISK) and Regulation Strategy and Effectiveness (Talkshow)

Regulation in Talkshow	BISK	
	Representation of Mother	Attachment Strategy
Effective-Social (B)	.20*	.34**
Ineffective-Social (C)	-.15	-.10
Ineffective-Self (A)	-.07	-.23*

Table 5: Attachment (BISK) and ABC-Classifications according to Emotion Regulation Behavior (Talkshow)

Emotion as Expressed and as Reported in the Interview:

Emotion in Talkshow	BISK: Emotional Openness		
	Sorrow	Fear	Anger
Directed	.34**	.30**	.15
Undirected	-.27*	-.30**	-.10
Averted / hidden	-.28**	-.10	-.09

Table 6: Talking about emotion as related to expressing emotion in relation to mother.

Emotional openness is seen both in the dyadic situation and the interview: *The more open* the adolescent talks about his own negative emotions, *the more likely* he directly seeks out his mother for help. This holds true for sorrow and fear, but not for anger.

Discussion

The results suggest that in the dyadic "Talkshow" situation the attachment system had been successfully activated in 12 years-olds. In a follow-up study, the validity of this situation will be tested for middle adolescence (14 and 16 yrs).

Adolescents can be discerned according to their primary ER strategy and the overall effectiveness thereof. Both variables showed significant correlations to the BISK attachment *strategy*. To the attachment *representation*, however, no correlations were found. This indicates

that the distinction between *behavioral-procedural* and *explicit-declarative* levels of attachment organization is of more than theoretical relevance.

The results can be seen as cross-validating the "Talkshow" situation on the one hand and the BISK interview for late childhood on the other hand.

The lack of correlation between the behavioral and declarative levels all the more raises the question: How then does attachment representation play out on the behavioral level? And how does the mothers' current behavior come into play?