Intimacy and Attachment in Adolescent Relationships

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Abstract

From an attachment theory framework this study investigated the relationship of working models of self and other to the experience of intimacy conceptualised as a multidimensional phenomena. It was hypothesised that more self disclosure and increased intimacy goals would be associated with a positive model of other and that a positive model of self would be associated with greater levels of receiving disclosure and perceiving a partner to be responsive. Using a cross sectional sample of upper high school students (N=265) the results provided support for the view that the model of other primarily influences intimacy goals and self disclosure. Partial support was found for the effect of the model of self on eliciting disclosure from others and perceptions of partner responsiveness. The results are discussed in the context of multidimensional models of intimacy and adolescent psychosocial development.

Intimacy is argued to be an important influence on relationship quality, and its presence in relationships gives a sense of ‘belonging’ to the individuals involved (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). When intimacy occurs with another person it produces positive affect states, such as happiness, feelings of closeness and being validated and cared for (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Conversely, a lack of intimacy in relationships can lead to feelings of depression, low relationship satisfaction, and loneliness (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). Despite the evidence that intimacy is associated with many benefits, people differ in the extent to which they desire intimacy in their relationships (Bartholomew, 1990). Attachment theory has recently been proposed as a theoretical framework to explain individual differences in experiencing intimacy (Prager, 2000). Bowlby (1980) proposed that the early care given to an infant is internalised to produce cognitive representations of the self and others, and these ‘working models’ continue to influence the interpretation of behaviour in interpersonal relationships across the lifespan. Weis (1982) argued that important changes occur in adolescent relationships with regard to both intimacy and attachment; and that peer relationships become of increasing importance.

Both adolescents and adults believe closeness, sharing and revealing private information are the most important aspects of intimacy (Monsour, 1992). According to Reis and Shaver’s (1988) ‘transactional’ model, intimacy is a process where one person ‘discloses’ information, and the listener responds in a way which produces feelings of validation and support. At each point in this process both partner’s goals, expectations and beliefs regarding interpersonal behaviour influence how each interaction is perceived and interpreted. Researchers (e.g., Grabill & Kerns, 2000; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004) have now adopted the model proposed by Reis and Shaver (1988) by using multiple measures of intimacy to capture the different processes involved.

A central concept of attachment theory is that working models influence the perceptions one holds of the behaviour of others in interpersonal experiences. The model proposed by Reis and Shaver (1988) allows the specific stages of the intimacy process, where working models of other and self can influence an individual’s motivation for intimacy and the interpretation of a partner’s behaviour, to be identified. Attachment working models of other
and self are proposed to have differential effects on aspects of intimacy such as self-disclosure, receiving disclosure, intimacy as an interpersonal goal, and perceptions of partner responsiveness.

For an exchange to be perceived as intimate one person must disclose revealing personal information about the self to the listener. The discloser is likely to be influenced by their working model of other in that individuals who believe that others are dependable and trustworthy are more likely to disclose important self-relevant information. On the other hand, individuals with a negative view of others will be likely to disclose less to reduce the risk of rejection. Individuals who expect others to respond to their feelings in a supportive, as opposed to unsupportive, manner are likely to disclose, secure in the belief that they will be understood. Intimate relationships also involve reciprocal disclosure of personal information. Empirical studies have confirmed a greater tendency of secure individuals, who have a positive model of self and other and greater care giver capacities, to receive disclosure from others (Grabill & Kerns, 2000) than attachment styles with a negative model of self. Mikulincer and colleagues (2001) found global measures of attachment dimensions were associated with differential subsequent feelings of empathy and personal distress in reactions to other’s problem situations. In particular, the model of self was positively related to empathic feelings.

Sanderson et al. (2005) have investigated the effect of intimacy ‘goals’ on behaviour. Individuals who have high intimacy goals, focus on intimacy and engage in patterns of behaviour that are conducive to creating intimacy in their relationships, rather than the pursuit of other goals such as self-exploration or independence. Expectations about the reliability and trustworthiness of others as conceptualised by attachment working model of other may provide an explanation for individual differences in intimacy goals. Individuals with an expectation that others will be available and responsive, characteristics of secure attachment, are more likely to value and desire intimacy in their relationships.

Ultimately the perception of intimacy depends on feeling understood, validated and cared for (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Cognitive models relating to expectations in relationships are thought to affect the interpretation of interpersonal behaviour by guiding selection and attention of information that confirms ‘self’ beliefs (Collins & Read, 1994). Individuals are more likely to attend to a relationship partner’s behaviour that is congruent with their own view of self. In a study investigating perceptions of intimacy according to attachment style, Grabill and Kerns (2000) found that Secure and Dismissing individuals, attachment styles characterised by a high sense of self-worth, rated their partners as more responsive to their disclosure. This indicates that high self-worth may be a key influence on the perceptions of responsiveness and intimacy in relationships.

The Present Study

The aim of this study is to determine the extent to which four particular aspects of intimacy relate to attachment working models of self and other. Specifically, it is hypothesised that the expectations about the reliability of others (model of other) will influence the desire an individual has for intimacy in their friendship (intimacy goals) and the extent to which an individual reveals personal information (self-disclosure). Individuals who hold a positive model of other (secure and preoccupied styles) are predicted to report more intimacy goals and self-disclosure than individuals with a negative model of other (fearful and dismissing styles). Model of self is proposed to explain differences in perceptions of receiving disclosure from others and perceptions of the responsiveness of partners. Individuals with a positive view of self will attend to behaviour of a relationship partner that confirms their self belief that they are worthy. Therefore, they are more likely to perceive others as disclosing personal information (other disclosure) and perceive partners as responsive to their needs (partner
responsiveness). Thus, individuals who have a positive model of self (secure and dismissing styles) are hypothesised to report receiving more disclosure from their friends and are more likely to perceive their friend as being responsive than individuals with a negative model of self (preoccupied and fearful styles).

Method

Participants

A cross-sectional sample of 284 Australian Capital Territory high school students aged 15 to 19 years (M = 17.31, SD = 0.69) initially participated with the majority of participants (83.6%) from an English speaking background. 19 cases were excluded due to missing data. The final sample consisted of 193 (73.3%) females and 72 (26.7%) males.

Procedure and Measures

Parental and individual consent was obtained for all participants before they took part in the research. Participants completed a questionnaire booklet in a classroom setting and were debriefed following completion of the study.

Attachment. Attachment style was assessed using the Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) which consists of four paragraphs each describing an attachment style. Participants rated the extent to which each attachment style describes them, from (1) not at all like me to (7) very much like me. Respondents were assigned to an attachment category based on their responses.

Intimacy Goals. The Intimacy Goals in Friendships Scale (Sanderson et al., 2005) was used to assess the extent participants desired and valued intimacy in their friendships. The scale consists of 14 items for which respondents are asked to rate their endorsement on a 5-point scale from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. Scales were summed to provide an overall score with higher values indicating a greater desire for intimacy in their relationship. Sanderson et al., (2005) report an internal reliability of .88, which was slightly lower than for the current study (α = .92).

Partner Responsiveness. A modified version of the Perceived Partner Responsiveness Scale (Reis, H., personal communication, May 10, 2005) was used to assess perceptions of partner responsivity. The original 18 items were reduced to 10 items asking respondents how true each statement was regarding their friend’s ability to make them feel understood, validated and cared for. Respondents rated each statement on a 5 point scale from (1) not at all true to (5) completely true. Scores on each of the items were summed to provide an overall score. Internal reliability for this study was high (Cronbach’s α = .94).

Other Disclosure. The Opener Scale (Miller et al., 1983) was used to assess the respondent’s perceptions of their ability to elicit disclosure from others. Respondents were asked to rate each of the 10 items on a 5-point scale from (5) strongly disagree to (1) strongly agree. The items were summed to provide an overall score with higher scores indicating greater perceptions of receiving disclosure from others. For the current study, internal reliability was high (α = .87).

Self-Disclosure. The 10 item Self-Disclosure Index (Miller et al., 1983) was used to assess the extent to which participants disclosed information relating to their thoughts and emotions. A 5-point scale accompanied each statement ranging from (5) strongly agree to (1) strongly disagree. Items were summed to create an overall score with high scores indicating greater self-disclosure. Miller et al., (1983) reported high internal reliability for the scales calculated for same-sex-friend (Cronbach’s α = .87 for men, .86 for women), which were similar to the current study (Cronbach’s α = .88).
Results

The means and standard deviations for the intimacy measures by each of the attachment categories are presented in Table 1. A one-way MANOVA yielded a significant overall main effect of Attachment Style on Intimacy, Wilks’s Λ $F (12, 683) = 7.343, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .101$. Follow up analysis revealed main effects for all four measures: Intimacy Goals $F (3,261) = 8.614, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .09$; Other Disclosure $F (3,261) = 9.683, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .10$; Self-Disclosure $F (3,261) = 8.988, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .094$; and Partner Responsiveness $F (3,261) = 10.750, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .11$.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Intimacy Measures by Attachment Style

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Secure (n = 137)</th>
<th>Fearful (n = 41)</th>
<th>Preoccupied (n = 63)</th>
<th>Dismissing (n = 24)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy Goals Mean (SD)</td>
<td>62.34 (6.34)</td>
<td>60.37 (6.07)</td>
<td>61.95 (5.99)</td>
<td>55.29 (8.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Disclosure Mean (SD)</td>
<td>42.55 (4.11)</td>
<td>41.29 (5.28)</td>
<td>39.49 (5.71)</td>
<td>37.83 (6.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner Respons. Mean (SD)</td>
<td>41.66 (5.93)</td>
<td>37.93 (6.26)</td>
<td>37.51 (7.17)</td>
<td>38.00 (7.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Disclosure Mean (SD)</td>
<td>35.23 (7.27)</td>
<td>29.97 (6.76)</td>
<td>31.70 (7.79)</td>
<td>29.66 (6.61)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Planned contrasts were conducted to test the *a priori* predictions. Differences in means of Intimacy Goals between Attachment styles characterised by a positive model of other (Secure and Preoccupied) were compared with those with a negative model of other (Fearful and Dismissing). As predicted, the means of the attachment styles with a positive view of others (M = 62.145) were higher than those with a negative view of others (M = 59.83), $t (261) = 4.477, p < .001$. Tukey *post hoc* comparisons indicated the difference between the Dismissing and Fearful groups was significant, $t (263) = -5.07, p < .01$. The Dismissing group also differed significantly from the Secure, $t (263) = -7.05, p < .01$, and Preoccupied groups $t (263) = -6.66, p < .01$. However, the Fearful group did not differ significantly from the Secure and the Preoccupied groups.

Group differences in Self-disclosure according to model of other were also investigated using planned contrasts. The means of the groups with a positive model of other (M = 33.46) (Secure and Preoccupied groups) were compared to the means of the groups with a negative model of other (M = 29.81) (Fearful and Dismissing). As expected, the results revealed that attachment styles with a positive model of other scored significantly higher than those with a negative model of other, $t (261) = 3.35, p < .001$. Tukey *post hoc* contrasts were conducted to examine all possible differences in the levels of Self-Disclosure. Contrary to expectations, the results reveal the Secure group was significantly higher than the Preoccupied group, $t (261) = 3.52, p < .01$. The Secure group was also higher than the Fearful, $t (261) = 5.25, p < .001$, and Dismissing groups, $t (261) = 5.56, p < .01$. None of the insecure groups differed significantly from each other.

Planned contrasts were then conducted to investigate the effect of model of self on Other Disclosure. The means of groups characterised by a positive model of self (Secure and Dismissing group) (M = 40.19) were compared with the mean of Attachment styles with a negative model of self (Fearful and Preoccupied) (M = 40.39). It was hypothesised that
groups with a positive model of self would report receiving greater levels of disclosure from others. However, the results revealed a non significant difference between the groups with a positive model of self and negative model of self. The pattern of means (Table 1) indicate the results are contrary to predictions. The Secure group was the highest (M = 42.55), the Fearful (M = 41.29) was the second highest, followed by Preoccupied (M = 39.49) and then Dismissing (M = 37.83). Tukey post hoc tests revealed the Fearful group was not significantly different to the Secure group and the Preoccupied group. Significant differences were found between the Secure and Preoccupied groups, $t(263) = 3.05, p < .01$, and Secure and Dismissing groups, $t(263) = 4.71, p < .01$.

Planned contrasts were conducted to investigate the effect of model of self on Partner Responsiveness by comparing the means of Attachment styles with a positive model of self (Secure and Dismissing group) (M = 39.83) with the mean of Attachment styles with a negative model of self (Preoccupied and Fearful) (M = 37.72). As predicted, the mean of the groups with positive model of self was significantly higher than groups with a negative model of self, $t(261) = 2.695, p < .007$. Post hoc comparisons found that the mean of the Dismissing group was significantly lower than the Secure group, $t(263) = 3.66, p < .05$, but not significantly different to the Fearful and Preoccupied group. The Secure group was also significantly higher than the Fearful, $t(263) = 3.73, p < .01$, and the Preoccupied groups, $t(263) = 5.15, p < .05$. There were no significant differences between the Fearful, Preoccupied and Dismissing groups.

**Discussion**

The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of attachment models of other and self on four major aspects of intimacy and the results provided support for the majority of the hypotheses. Those with a positive model of other were predicted to report greater desire for intimacy in their friendship and higher levels of personal disclosure than those with a negative model of other. As predicted, a positive model of other was associated with greater intimacy goals and higher levels of self-disclosure in friendship. The hypothesis that attachment working model of self influences perceptions of receiving disclosure from others, however, was not supported. Participants with a positive model of self did not differ significantly from those with a negative model of self on perceptions of receiving disclosure from others. However, the hypothesis that individuals with a positive model of self would report greater feelings of being understood, validated and cared for by their friends was supported.

Although the results of the a priori tests supported the majority of hypotheses, follow-up analysis revealed the pattern of means was not quite in line with predictions. Results of the post hoc comparison of intimacy goals showed that despite the means following the expected direction, the Fearful group was not significantly different to the Secure and Preoccupied group. A subtle difference in the conceptualisation of negative model of other may explain the Fearful group’s higher level of intimacy goals in comparison to the Dismissing group. Bartholomew (1990) argues that the negative model of other held by Dismissing individuals is due to a denial of the importance of interpersonal relationships. This allows Dismissing individuals to maintain distance and preserve self-esteem. On the other hand, Fearful individuals have a desire for intimacy in their relationships but avoid intimacy to prevent the risk of being rejected. These slight differences in motivations, despite both attachment styles having a negative model of other, may contribute to the unexpected discrepancy in the level of intimacy goals observed between the two styles.

As predicted, individuals who believe friends will be responsive to their needs are more likely to self-disclose than individuals who do not believe their friends will be responsive. Although the post hoc comparisons revealed a significant difference between the Secure and
Preoccupied groups, the pattern of means was in the expected direction. The results of the present study support previous research, which found that Secure and Preoccupied individuals reported the greatest levels of self-disclosure in their friendships (Grabill & Kerns, 2000). Interestingly, the attachment styles that reported the highest levels of self-disclosure were also the highest in desiring intimacy in their friendships. Individuals with high intimacy goals may use self-disclosure as a way of initiating intimacy in friendships.

The predicted influence of model of self on perceptions of receiving disclosure from others and partner responsiveness received partial support from the results of this study. Contrary to predictions, attachment styles with a positive model of self did not differ from those with a negative model of self on perceptions of receiving disclosure from others. Although Secure individuals reported the highest levels of receiving disclosure from others, Dismissing individuals, reported the lowest level of receiving disclosure. Contrary to expectations, the Fearful group reported the second highest level of receiving disclosure from others.

This result is surprising considering Bartholomew and Horowitz’s (1991) description of ‘Openers’. Openers are described as individuals with high self-esteem, who are low in anxiety, and like being around other people, while Fearful individuals are described as introverted, socially anxious and unexpressive (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The elevated levels of receiving disclosure in the Fearful group may be explained by the latent desire for intimacy these individuals are suggested to have (Bartholomew, 1990). A fear of rejection prevents Fearful individuals from initiating the intimacy process, but receiving disclosure from others may be a way to satisfy their desire for intimacy and so they overestimate the level of disclosure they receive.

Finally, as expected, attachment styles with a positive model of self had higher perceptions of partner responsiveness than attachment styles with a negative view of self. Although the pattern of means was in the expected direction, the post hoc comparisons revealed a significant difference between Secure and Dismissing groups, but no significant difference between the Dismissing, Preoccupied and Fearful groups. This finding was not consistent with the results of Grabill and Kerns (2000) who found Dismissing individuals reported greater perceptions of partner responsiveness than both the Fearful and Preoccupied groups. The proportion of Dismissing individuals in this sample, however, was lower than expected. This may have affected the ability of this study to detect a significant difference between the Dismissing, and the Fearful and Preoccupied groups in perceptions of the responsiveness of their friend.

**Limitations and future research**

Although the overall sample size was quite large in this study, the unequal numbers of participants in the attachment style categories may have obscured some significant differences between the groups. Future research may overcome these limitations by selectively sampling to increase the numbers of participants in each of the attachment styles. Additionally, the limited numbers of males precluded any appropriate analyses by sex. There is considerable debate in the intimacy field regarding sex differences in intimacy. For example, women have been found to disclose more than males and receive more disclosure from both males and females (Dolgin & Minowa, 1997). Conducting the analyses for males and females separately may have revealed important sex differences in intimacy.

**Conclusions**

This study investigated the influence of attachment working models on four related aspects of intimacy: intimacy goals, self-disclosure, other disclosure, and perceptions of partner responsiveness. Attachment styles characterised by a positive model of other were
associated with high intimacy goals and greater self-disclosure in adolescents. Mixed support was found for the impact of positive model of self on levels of receiving disclosure from others and perceiving a partner as responsive. The findings show that intimacy in adolescence is influenced by attachment through the concept of working models an individual holds in relation to self and others. The results from the present study highlight the importance of conceptualising intimacy as a multidimensional construct when attempting to investigate how individuals differ in their experience of intimacy. Experiencing appropriate components of intimacy in adolescent friendships contributes to the skills necessary for reciprocal relationships in adulthood to be developed.

References


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