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## A Comparison of the Attachment with Parents and the Attachment of Romantic Partner

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## **A comparison of the attachment with parents and the attachment of romantic partner**

### **Introduction**

The study of attachment is not the unknown. There are several different theorists, theories, and studies. Everyone will experience attachment in some form or shape, either with family, friends, or romantic relationships. The study of attachment is furthermore presented in numerous introduction psychology courses, and incorporated in some way in upper division courses. This study will focus on attachment, specifically within the context of parents and romantic partners.

According to author L.N. Land, “The attachment paradigm is often used to describe the critical nature of the relationship between child and caretaker on healthy self development and interpersonal functioning” (65). Research on attachment has grown to include different aspects and dimensions, especially that of adult relationships (Caron, 245). So why study attachment in adult relationships? It has been found that in adult’s relationships there are several different “mental models” for attachment with various individuals in their lives. The attachment may also vary depending on “degree” and could also have diverse patterns (Caron, 245). This would mean that an individual could have different attachment patterns depending on the person, there may not be a specific attachment level for every person an individual encounters or has a relationship with. According to Caron, a person in their young adult years has typically more than five “attachment figures” (p.246). These figures could range from parents, friends, boyfriend/girlfriend, or even a significant role model.

Hazan and Shaver explored the world of attachment and proposed that the attachment an individual holds to a parent or caretaker, would direct them to have that same attachment and emotion toward people in their adulthood (Caron, 246). It has also been discovered that the early experiences and bonds in an individual's life, will influence the attachment to other connections they make later in life (Land, 64). These findings would suggest that the attachment an individual would possess with their parents or caretakers would in some way determine the attachment level they hold with individuals they encounter, or the relationships they have, in their adult years.

Adolescence can be a very trying, and difficult time for many people due to the changing dimensions of emotionality, physicality, and surroundings. During adolescence individuals continue to obtain attachment with parents, however, a shift begins to develop, and the emphasis is on their relationship with their friends and romantic relationships. Youths tend to approach their friends and romantic partners for support rather than their parents (Black, 1459). According to Black, 81% of young adults reported that they seek out their friends or romantic partners when in a time of despair or trouble, compared to the 19% that find comfort in discussing their issues with a parent (1460). This would imply that the relationships that teenagers have with friends and partners begin to develop, and those with their parents have less significance.

The attachment theory would reveal that the experiences that a person has with parents in earlier years will influence the way an individual will function with friends or relationships later on in their lives (Black, 1460). Hare stated, "When the emotional and equilibrium of families is maintained in such a way for years and years, this (dys)functional system is often recreated with other emotionally evocative contexts of the offspring, such as within their own romantic relationships. This perspective argues that the development of aggression within one's intimate

relationships be a symptom or byproduct of dysfunctional emotional processes and compromises that have been occurring within the family system for generations and generations” (809). This would bring the correlation of consistent family behavior and attachments, with the behavior that an individual carries into a romantic relationship. The observation of parents, and relationships with parents could be a factor for relationships in the future. The family “context” in most cases will have a role in the skills that a person will possess in a romantic relationship (Hare, 808).

Additional studies have also examined the correlation between attachment with parents and romantic partners. What was revealed is an affiliation with attachment to parents, and the behavior in romantic relationships (Dinero, 625). This correlation does not halt at young adulthood either. It has been found that marital satisfaction could be correlated with the relationship that the individual holds with a parent (Dinero, 624). For example, if there are difficulties in a marriage, that could have an association with problems that have occurred between the parents and their child. A reason for that association may be supported by a theory that Bowlby proposed. Bowlby stated that children make a “working model” for themselves and their relationship with their mother and father. These working models contain “guidelines” and “prototypes” for their relationships in the future, those including friendships and romance (Nosko, 646).

When individuals reach young adulthood, they begin to desire and pursue romantic relationships. The development of those romantic relationships, and any intimacy that they construct in those relationships, is seen to be influenced by their parents, specifically the way the parents chose to raise their children, and the attachment level. This could play a part and create a difference for their future (Nosko, 645). The quality of those relationships could also be swayed by parents. The relationship of parent-child could have modifications in the establishment of a

romantic relationship (Caron, 246). From studies completed on this subject previously, it could be understood that there appears to be various associations between the attachment of a parent, and the relationship they possess with a future romantic partner.

For example, according to Nosko, an individual who has a secure working model with a parent is more inclined to possess a secure attachment with an intimate or romantic partner. On the other hand, an individual who has an anxiously attached relationship with parents tends to have an insecure attachment with their romantic partner, indicating that they may be cautious or nervous about their partner's commitment, and the desire to be closer to that person (646). A person with a secure attachment style is seen to develop positive working models that allow them to process "emotionally evocative information", not only with their parents, but their romantic relationships as well (Hare, 809). Secure adults are seen to have had their needs met, both sensitively and consistently in their earlier years. This allows them to trust other people in their lives, and to be able to be open with others. On the other hand, insecure adults find it more challenging to allow others to get close to them due to the fact that they do not expect another person to accept them. They feel they will be rejected. They may also demand the other person to be very close to them because their parents have been "unavailable" for them (Black, 1460).

However, not all studies have supported these similar results and associations. Furman and Shaver, and Belsky and Brennan, discovered that the attachment patterns that an individual possesses with their romantic partner, or in their romantic relationship, is not congruent with attachment experienced with their parents (Caron, 246). Ross and Spinner have also reported the results that attachment measured within different relationships have had different outcomes, and were not similar with each other (Caron, 246). Therefore, not all studies have found the same results within the question of attachment regarding parents and romantic partner.

This subject is important to study because it could determine if the relationship with a parent could influence the continuing functioning and relationships with others in adult years. If there is a positive correlation, we could provide to others the significance in the work and findings of attachment, and discover ways to provide this information to parents to help ensure healthy relationships in childhood and adulthood.

This study will look at four variables within the question of attachment with parents and romantic partners. The first question is whether the attachment to parents is associated with the attachment to romantic partners in young adulthood. Next, the second question is whether there is an association between the attachment to a parent and the quality or satisfaction with their romantic partner in young adult years. The third question is if there is an association between the attachment with a parent, in the form of care, and the attachment to the romantic partner, in the form of avoidance. Lastly, the question is whether there is an association between the attachment with a parent in the form of alienation, and the attachment with a romantic partner in the form of anxiety.

### **Method**

A meta-analysis was conducted on eight different studies. These articles were found using a psychology-based database containing all scholarly articles. The studies used are shown in Table 1.

#### **Table 1: Studies used in meta-analysis**

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Variable 1: Attachment to parent compared to attachment in romantic relationship

1. Title: The coherence of dyadic behavior across parent-child and romantic relationship as mediated by the internalized representation of experience

Authors: Roisman, Madsen, Hennighausen, Sroufe, and Collins

N = 170

r = .26

2. Title: Influence of family origin and adult romantic partners on romantic attachment security

Authors: Dinero, Conger, Shaveer, Widaman and Larsen-Rife

N = 559

r = .32

Variable 2: Attachment to parent compared to relationship quality/satisfaction with romantic partner

1. Title: How do I love thee? Let me count the ways: Parenting during adolescence, attachment styles, and romantic narratives in emerging adulthood

Authors: Nosko, Tieu, Lawford, and Pratt

N = 896

r = .14

2. Title: Intergenerational transmission of aggression in romantic relationships: The moderating role of attachment security

Authors: Hare, Miga, and Allen

N = 75

r = .21

Variable 3: Attachment to parent in the form of care compared to the attachment to romantic partner in the form of avoidance

1. Title: Comparisons of close relationships: An evaluation of relationships quality and patterns of attachment to parents, friends, and romantic partners in young adults

Authors: Caron, Lafontaine, Bureau, Levesque, and Johnson

N = 2,214

Maternal  $r = -0.29$

Paternal  $r = -0.28$

2. Title: Correlates of adult attachment avoidance: Men's avoidance of intimacy in romantic relationships

Authors: Land, Rochlen, and Vaughn

N = 266

Maternal  $r = -0.31$

Paternal  $r = -0.19$

Variable 4: Attachment to parent in the form of alienation compared to the attachment to romantic partner in the form of anxiety

1. Title: Title: Comparisons of close relationships: An evaluation of relationships quality and patterns of attachment to parents, friends, and romantic partners in young adults

Authors: Caron, Lafontaine, Bureau, Levesque, and Johnson

N = 2,214

$r = .52$

2. Title: Recollections of being loved: Implications of childhood experiences with parents for young adults' romantic relationships



Authors: Black and Schutte

N = 205

r = .29

The correlation coefficients were taken from each variable in the article and transformed using the Fisher's r to Z table. The results gave the r for each variable.

### Results

The results of this study are presented in Table 2. For the variable of attachment to parent, compared to the attachment of a romantic partner,  $r = .29$ . This variable had a medium effect size. The variable comparing attachment to parent, and the relationship quality and satisfaction, had  $r = .17$ . This variable had a small to medium effect size. The third variable of attachment to parent in the form of care, compared to the attachment of a romantic partner in the form of avoidance, had  $r = -.30$  for maternal, and  $r = -.23$  for paternal. The maternal variable had a medium effect size, and the paternal variable had a small to medium effect size. The last variable of attachment to parent in the form of alienation, compared to the attachment with a romantic partner in the form of anxiety, had  $r = .41$ . This effect size was considered medium to large.

Table 2: Effect sizes

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Variable 1	.29
Variable 2	.17
Variable 3.1	-.30
Variable 3.2	-.23
Variable 4	.41

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Variable 1: Attachment to parent compared to attachment to romantic partner, Variable 2: Attachment to parent compared to romantic relationship quality/satisfaction, Variable 3.1: Attachment to mother in the form of care compared to attachment to romantic partner in the form of avoidance, Variable 3.2: Attachment to father in the form of care compared to attachment to romantic partner in the form of avoidance, Variable 4: Attachment to parent in the form of alienation compared to attachment to romantic partner in the form of anxiety

## **Discussion**

The first variable of attachment to parent, compared to romantic partner, had a medium effect size. This would suggest that the attachment to a parent is occasionally associated to the attachment to romantic partner, but is not strongly correlated.

The second variable of attachment to parent, compared to relationship quality/satisfaction, had a small to medium effect size. This would suggest that attachment to a parent is not strongly correlated to the quality of the romantic relationship for the individual. It has a small relation. The level or style of attachment to parents does not seem to be associated to the quality of the relationship.

The third variable of attachment to parent in the form of care, compared to the attachment with a romantic partner in the form of avoidance, had a negative medium effect size for maternal attachment, and a negative small to medium effect size for paternal attachment. These results would imply that the more attachment to a parent, the less avoidance they experience in their romantic relationship. For maternal attachment, it would mean that it is negatively correlated, but not very strong. For paternal, it would suggest that it has some form of negative correlation between the variable, but it is small.

The fourth variable of attachment to parent in the form of alienation, compared to the attachment to a romantic partner in the form of anxiety, has a medium to large effect size. This would suggest that the alienation attachment to a parent would increase the chance of having

anxiety attachment in romantic relationship. It containing a medium to large effect size would suggest it has a respectable correlation, but is not overly strong.

The study was limited by the small amount of current academic studies conducted on this subject. Due to the limited number of studies, the meta-analysis is not as valid as if there were more articles pertaining to the subject and variables. The more numbers present for the study, the more confident in the findings there would be.

For future research on this topic, it would be helpful to have more resources and studies to make the meta-analysis more valid and reliable. It would also be interesting to split up the parents' score on attachment to specifically see the attachment numbers between fathers and mothers. It would be beneficial to focus on gender and devote one study for that of males, and another for females. It would also be interesting to see demographics of the individuals and determine if there is a correlation between race, economic status, age, and the attachment to the parent and romantic partner.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this project was able to evaluate and dig deeper into attachment when looking at parents and romantic relationships. Although the variables had some form of association, the levels varied. The majority of the studies had a small or medium effect size, which could suggest that more research needs to be completed on this subject considering the high level of studies who have confidence in the idea there is some form of correlation between the attachment of parents and romantic partners.

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