

COMMENTARY

ATTACHMENT AND MEMORY RESEARCH: REFLECTING ON A SHARED PAST AND
A COLLABORATIVE FUTURE

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This article is part of the issue “The Mother–Child Attachment Partnership in Early Childhood: Secure Base Behavioral and Representational Processes,” Germán E. Posada and Harriet S. Waters (Issue Editors). For a full listing of articles in this issue, see: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/15405834/2018/83/4>.

This commentary applauds the authors of the monograph, *The Mother–Child Attachment Partnership in Early Childhood: Secure Base Behavioral and Representational Processes*, for their thorough and elegant exploration of the development of attachment working models in the preschool years in relation to maternal sensitivity and attachment representations, mother–child co-constructions of attachment-relevant stories, and children’s own secure base behavior. These findings are set against a backdrop of children’s memory development, with the recommendation that future research delves even younger to explore the development of attachment working models in children under 3 years. A second recommendation is to continue the work with older children, with a particular focus on the conversations they are having with caregivers about actual attachment-related experiences. This new research poses challenges, especially with at-risk samples. Fortunately, the stage is now set for attachment and memory researchers to come together to continue to map the development of attachment working models.

The study of attachment security has always been inextricably linked to memory for social interactions. Bowlby’s (1969) original proposal was that

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attachment security was built upon everyday interactions in infancy, and later also upon conversations between young children and primary caregivers about their experiences (Bowlby, 1973, 1988). The only way that those interactions and conversations could affect children's later attachment behavior is through some form of long-term memory for those experiences. Inspired by Craik's (1943) idea of mental models, Bowlby (1969) proposed the construct of internal working models of self and others as the memory mechanism of attachment stability. Thus, Bowlby's proposed transition during early childhood from a primarily behavioral system to a representational system—via memory for everyday experiences and conversations—is central to attachment theory. Ever since, researchers have strived to capture the essence of internal working models of attachment, a concept that is as intriguing as it is elusive (see Bretherton, 2005; Waters & Waters, 2006). Theorists of attachment working models have since come both from the attachment field (e.g., Bretherton, 1985, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995; Waters & Waters, 2006) and from the memory development field (e.g., Fivush, 2006; Nelson, 1999) in their focus on adults' and children's attachment representations.

Yet, it can be argued that the empirical study of internal working models of attachment has been more extensive for adults (e.g., Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2011; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; Waters & Waters, 2006; cf. Van IJzendoorn, 1995; Verhage et al., 2016) than for children (e.g., Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990; Bretherton & Oppenheim, 2003; Waters, Rodrigues, & Ridgeway, 1998). Thus, Posada's and Waters's new monograph, *The Mother–Child Attachment Partnership in Early Childhood: Secure Base Behavioral and Representational Processes*, is a landmark publication in the attachment literature. It is a thorough and elegant exploration of the development of attachment working models in the preschool years, in concert with the continued development of children's secure-base behavior. In a coherent series of six beautifully designed studies, the authors methodically explore the links between preschool children's attachment behavior and attachment representations in relation to maternal sensitivity and attachment representations, and mother–child co-construction of attachment-relevant stories. Each one of these difficult constructs has been measured with great care, often in multiple ways, including novel measures making their debut in this monograph (the mother–child co-construction tasks and the Parental Secure Base Q-set). The results are clear and striking. Preschool children's attachment behavior is linked to their secure-base representations. Mothers' sensitivity, their own attachment representations, and the quality of their communication all play unique roles in children's attachment behavior and attachment representations by the end of the preschool years. In fact, mother–child verbal communication (as indexed in two joint storytelling tasks) is especially strong in its prediction of children's later secure-base

behavior. For instance, in Study 4 (Chapter V), mothers' co-construction skills when children were 3.5 years uniquely predicted 9% of the variance in children's secure-base behavior 2 years later, at age 5.5 years, even after controlling for mothers' concurrent sensitivity and co-construction skills. Thus, the findings of this monograph strongly support Bowlby's (1969, 1973, 1988) assertion that both nonverbal and verbal interactions continue to be important for children's evolving secure-base behavior and for their internal working models of relationships in the preschool years.

These findings are novel and exciting, both from a theoretical point of view as well as a practical one. Thanks to this monograph, we are now much closer to understanding how children form working models of attachment. Given the importance of these early attachment representations for their later attachment, the practical implications for future interventions aimed at enhancing attachment security are large. My own interpretation of the findings from the final study (Chapter VII) is that it will be vital in future intervention research to work closely with mothers to strengthen their own attachment representations prior to attempting to change their communication styles. The impact on parent-training programs should be far-reaching.

MEMORY DEVELOPMENT IN YOUNG CHILDREN: IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH ON WORKING MODELS OF ATTACHMENT

As always, however, there is work yet to be done. The youngest samples in the monograph are 3-year-old children. We know from the childhood memory literature that a great deal of memory development has already taken place by this age. As mentioned earlier, memory theorists (Fivush, 2006; Nelson, 1999) have already reviewed the construct of attachment working models in light of script theory, and specifically with respect to developments in children's generalized event representations. For instance, Fivush (2006) pointed out that children can and do generate a script from a single experience, although that script will become more nuanced and hierarchically organized with each new experience of a similar event (e.g., separation from a parent on the first day of childcare vs. on subsequent days under varying conditions). Because a rudimentary script can be formed on the basis of a single experience, I propose that it is also important to review the construct of attachment working models with respect to children's developing memory for specific, one-time events: their evolving episodic memory. This literature demonstrates that even 6-month-old infants are capable of long-term memory of up to a day for a very simple novel event (Barr, Dowden, & Hayne, 1996), although their memory for specific experiences increases dramatically in the next few months. For instance, 9-month-olds can retain novel events for several weeks, and they can even sometimes reproduce

two-step events in the correct sequence (Carver & Bauer, 1999). Their memory undergoes a dramatic improvement by 10 months, with the ability to retain multistep events for up to 6 months in some instances (Carver & Bauer, 2001). Children's verbal memory for specific past events begins at around 18 months when they first start referencing recently completed activities (Reese, 1999; Sachs, 1983); over the next 2 years, they become able to tell a naïve listener a relatively complete account of an entire event (see Reese, 2009, Table 1 for a review of these memory milestones).

There is no reason to believe that attachment events are any less memorable than other events; in fact, they could be even more memorable because of their emotional content (Levine & Pizarro, 2004). It is thus highly likely that children's internal working models of attachment have already begun forming prior to age 3. A next step in this research area is to delve downward into the very beginnings of internal working models, which I suspect means working with children in the second year of life. As demonstrated in a visual habituation task, 12-month-old infants already hold expectations of others' attachment behaviors that are based on their own attachment patterns (Johnson et al., 2010). By age 18 months to 2 years, children have also consolidated a visual representation of self that, in concert with the level of detail with which their mothers discuss past events, may form the basis of autobiographical memory (Harley & Reese, 1999; see Howe & Courage, 1993). Thus, I predict that nascent internal working models are forming alongside behavioral patterns of attachment from at least the beginning of the second year of life. Of course, measuring these internal working models at such a young age will be even more difficult than measuring them with preschoolers. Attachment researchers will need to work closely with infant memory researchers to develop new nonverbal techniques of accessing representations of attachment-relevant events at these ages.

THE POTENTIAL IMPORTANCE OF REMINISCING ABOUT PAST EVENTS FOR CHILDREN'S ATTACHMENT WORKING MODELS

My second recommendation is that attachment researchers collaborate with memory researchers to study older children too, with a specific focus on parent-child reminiscing conversations about actual attachment-related memories (e.g., separations, illnesses, etc.). It was Bowlby (1973, p. 322) who first proposed the importance of conversations with attachment figures to create shared working models via "frank communication by parents of working models—of themselves, of child, and of others—that are not only tolerably valid but are open to be questioned and revised." Along with others (e.g., Bost et al., 2006; Fivush, 2006; Nelson, 1999), I suspect that these conversations are critical in shaping children's internal working models, and

subsequent attachment security, for several reasons. As I argued earlier, these conversations are about emotional experiences, which renders them more memorable than mundane events (Levine & Pizarro, 2004). Second, we know from existing research that individual differences in maternal elaboration in these conversations are linked both to children's attachment security and to children's self-concept, which is essentially their working model of self. For instance, Fivush and Vasudeva (2002) were among the first to show that mothers who were more elaborative when reminiscing about past events had children who were rated as more securely attached (cf. Coppola, Ponzetti, & Vaughn, 2014; Etzion-Carasso & Oppenheim, 2000; Hsiao, Koren-Karie, Bailey, & Moran, 2015; Laible & Thompson, 2000; Reese & Farrant, 2003). We went on to demonstrate that when children were securely attached as toddlers, their mothers reminisced with them in emotionally more open ways into the preschool years (Newcombe & Reese, 2004), and these emotion-laden discussions were related to children developing a more consistent representation of self (Bird & Reese, 2006). A limitation of some of the reminiscing literature with respect to attachment security has been the reliance on maternal sorts or ratings of attachment security rather than observer sorts or ratings (but see Bost et al., 2006; Coppola et al., 2014; Hsiao et al., 2015; Reese, Meins, Fernyhough, & Centifanti, 2018 for exceptions). In contrast, Posada and Waters's current measures of children's attachment behavior rely on observer ratings rather than maternal ratings. Future work on reminiscing and attachment needs to move to observer measures of children's attachment security. In this future work, it will also be vital to explore caregiver-child conversations that are both consonant and dissonant with the child's original perceptions of the experience (see Bretherton, 2005; Salmon & Reese, 2015).

Another limitation of the attachment and reminiscing literature has been a focus on a broad range of past events and not a specific focus on attachment-related past experiences. I propose that this broad focus may even be underestimating the association between attachment security and mother-child reminiscing. It is notable, however, that the correlation I found (Reese, 2008) between mothers' secure attachment representations (measured via overall coherence on the Adult Attachment Interview [AAI]) and mothers' elaboration about everyday past events with their preschoolers is identical ($r = 0.39$) to the correlation that the present authors found between maternal AAI coherence and elaboration on two attachment-relevant storytelling tasks (see Tables 1 and 2 in Chapter IV). This symmetry suggests that all of these narrative tasks are tapping into a similar construct of mother-child communication; the next step is to conduct studies that include both joint storytelling and reminiscing in the same design to ascertain their intercorrelation. Given that other reminiscing studies have found that mothers' reminiscing style is distinct from their conversational style during free-play or

book-reading interactions (see Haden & Fivush, 1996; Leyva, Sparks, & Reese, 2012), another possibility is that each measure of mother–child communication is tapping into a different aspect, and that together they could explain even more variance in children’s attachment security. Ultimately, we need to combine forces to create the most robust measure of mother–child communication possible in order to test the mediation hypothesis that mothers’ attachment representations are linked to children’s attachment security through mother–child communication.

CHALLENGES IN ATTACHMENT AND MEMORY RESEARCH

Methodological issues that we all must consider when conducting these new studies include expanding the horizon to fathers and other attachment figures, especially given the ever-increasing involvement of fathers in raising young children (see Verhage et al., 2016). Specifically, Verhage et al.’s meta-analysis showed that the percentage of variance in children’s attachment security accounted for by parents’ attachment representations was stable over the 20 years since Van IJzendoorn’s (1995) meta-analysis for fathers (effect sizes of $r=0.31$ to $r=0.33$), but decreased over time for mothers (effect sizes of $r=0.55$ to $r=0.37$). The authors suggest that contemporary mothers’ attachment representations are playing a lesser role in their children’s attachment security now than they were 20 years ago, perhaps because of increased gender equity in caregiving.

We also need to measure children’s language development in more comprehensive ways as a factor both in mother–child discussions about attachment topics and in the development of internal working models. Specifically, we will need to measure children’s narrative competence, not just their vocabulary levels, when accounting for children’s language development in these studies. It is children’s narrative development that captures their ability to verbally represent events, which presumably is crucial in the development of coherent internal working models (see Nelson, 1999). Narrative competence and vocabulary levels are related but are certainly not synonymous (see Suggate, McAnally, Schaughency, & Reese, in press). Finally, we would ideally assess attachment security at more than two datapoints in order to measure nonlinear patterns of change over time in co-occurrence with changes in mother–child communication and life stressors.

Once this new correlational longitudinal work is accomplished, let’s be brave and go a step further into intervention research on attachment security. After all, the crux of attachment research is not just about describing and understanding attachment patterns, but in finding ways to improve attachment security when the relationship has gone awry (e.g., Cassidy et al., 2017). Extrapolating from the findings in this monograph, one such

design would be to first attempt to strengthen caregivers' secure base representations (and possibly also caregivers' sensitivity) before attempting any changes in caregiver-child communication about attachment-relevant topics. With such a design, we could then contrast the effects of coaching caregivers in more effective storytelling about hypothetical attachment events versus actual events on children's attachment security. Even with middle-class samples, these interventions would need to be planned and implemented carefully, bearing in mind the potential for some mothers to be controlling rather than autonomy supportive in their use of an elaborative reminiscing style (see Cleveland & Reese, 2005).

Our latest research shows that maternal sensitivity from the first year of life is key in mothers developing an emotionally open style of reminiscing about negative events with their preschoolers, and in children's willingness to discuss negative past events with their mothers (Reese et al., 2018). In that longitudinal research, mothers' sensitivity during play sessions with their 8-month-old infants trumped other important factors such as maternal depression and children's attachment security (via the Strange Situation) in predicting later mother-child reminiscing style. Thus, any reminiscing intervention aimed at promoting attachment security needs to ensure that mothers first understand how to engage sensitively with their children in all sorts of interactions, but especially when discussing negatively charged events, and especially with at-risk samples. Salmon, Dittman, Sanders, Burson, and Hammington (2014) provided an object lesson here in their attempts to teach mothers of young children with conduct disorders to reminisce in elaborative and emotion-rich ways as an adjunct to parent management training. They reported that although mothers managed to learn the new conversational techniques and to retain them in part over the 4-month follow-up, it may have been at the expense of learning other critical techniques of the parent management training. Indeed, there was no long-term benefit of the emotion-rich reminiscing for reducing children's behavioral problems or increasing their emotion understanding; instead, children of mothers in the emotional reminiscing condition actually had higher levels of disruptive behavior at the immediate post-test compared to the parent-management training control group. (This difference between the two groups had disappeared by the 4-month follow-up.) Salmon and colleagues recommend a more intensive focus on emotion talk in intervention studies for optimal effects.

Moreover, Valentino and colleagues' important work with maltreating mothers suggests that there are other factors besides their attachment representations that are at play in shaping their elaborative reminiscing styles (see Lawson, Valentino, McDonnell, & Speidel, 2018). Lawson et al. found that although insecure attachment representations were linked to less elaborative and emotion-rich reminiscing among nonmaltreating mothers, no such association existed for maltreating mothers. Therefore, my own belief

is that we need to do additional careful correlational work with at-risk samples, such as in Lawson et al., before implementing conversational interventions with those families.

For instance, given our new correlational findings that maternal sensitivity with infants uniquely predicts later mother–child elaboration about fear events (Reese et al., 2018), an extension would be to first test whether similar associations are present in samples of children who are at risk of developing anxiety problems, perhaps on the basis of infant temperament measures. If the same associations are present in an at-risk sample as in the community sample, then work could proceed on designing a reminiscing intervention for parents of anxious preschoolers. We know from research with clinical samples of older children with anxiety disorders that their parents have less elaborative conversations with them about past emotions compared to a nondisordered sample (Suveg et al., 2008). If parents could be taught to reminisce more sensitively and openly with their preschoolers about emotions, and specifically about fear and anxiety, perhaps this coaching would have positive effects both on increasing children’s skill at coping with anxiety and on strengthening their attachment security with parents, thus beginning a virtuous cycle that could even help to prevent anxiety disorders.

CONCLUSION

The authors of this monograph have charted the territory of preschool children’s attachment working models in relation to mother–child communication with great precision and depth. The time is thus ripe for the field to integrate the co-construction of hypothetical attachment scenarios with co-construction of actual past attachment experiences in children’s lives, and with even younger children. I encourage attachment and memory researchers to come together to employ every trick of their respective trades to continue to map the development of internal working models in early childhood.

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