

Adolescent Representations of Close Relationships: Organized Around A Secure Base

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ABSTRACT

The current study assessed the presence of a secure base script in adolescence, using both younger (8th grade) and older (11th grade) females. Furthermore the specificity of a secure base script was evaluated by story prompts that elicited both “Me & Mom” and “Me & Dad” stories as well as general, third person attachment narratives. “Mom & Dad” stories added a further dimension by asking whether observing a close relationship (your own Mom/Dad) would facilitate the formation of a generalized secure base script.

40 females at each grade participated. Results showed that adolescents did in fact possess a secure base script that characterized their personal relationships with their parents. Script scores were not correlated with GPA or English grade indicating that general intellectual functioning was not a factor in assigning scores. In 11th grade significant correlations among the different attachment narratives provided evidence of a generalized script about close relationships. Comparable generality was not present in 8th grade.

INTRODUCTION

Attachment theory suggests that beginning at infancy, children store information about the nature of relationships which they carry with them throughout their lives. This information comes to children through their interactions with their primary caretakers, generally their mothers, but also their fathers. With the recent focus on representation, a key research question has been how to bridge the gap between early assessments of children's "working models" and adult assessment, particularly after the recent report of 20 year stability of attachment classifications from infancy to adulthood (E. Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albershein, 2000).

One promising approach is the use of a script-based approach that scores attachment related narratives in terms of a secure base script. Script scores have been used to predict attachment security for both children and adults. Our goal was to assess the presence of a secure base script in adolescence. Furthermore, we explored the specificity of a secure base script by designing "Me and Mom" and "Me and Dad" story prompts as well as general, 3rd person attachment narratives.

Participants and Design

Forty 8th grade and forty 11th grade adolescent females participated. In two sessions they produced 10 attachment-related stories from word prompt outlines that suggested a storyline. Six narratives represented personal scripts and were told in the 1st person, “Me & Mom” (Acne, The Party), “Me & Dad” (Tennis Match, Studying for an Exam), “Mom & Dad” (Trouble at Work, Weekend Getaway). Four were 3rd person narratives, two adult-adult stories selected from the H.Waters & Rodrigues narrative battery (Camping Trip, The Accident), and two boyfriend/girlfriend stories (School Play, Ski Trip). Information about overall GPA and English grade was also obtained to assess general intellectual functioning.

Script Assessment

Participants were asked to use the columns of words to frame a story, going from left to right. The prompt words are only a guide and elaborations are welcome. After the participant reviews each outline and indicates they are ready, a tape recorder is turned on and the generated passage is recorded. For each story line there is a prototypic secure base script. All stories are scored on a 7-1 scriptedness scale by two independent raters. Alphas of the averaged scores ranged from .82 to .95.

TABLE 1: SAMPLE ADOLESCENT PROMPT-WORD OUTLINES

Acne (Me and Mom)

Sunday	Mom	laugh
mirror	talk	bathroom
acne	herself	experiment
embarrassed	acne	make-up

The Tennis Match (Me and Dad)

championship	opponent	losing
nervous	discuss	look
Dad	strategy	Dad
ask	game begins	thumbs-up

SAMPLE ADOLESCENT PROMPT-WORD OUTLINES CONT.

Trouble at Work (Mom and Dad)

Mom and Dad	talk	dinner
worried	lay-offs	converse
call	options	smile
Mom	uncertain	decision

School Play (boyfriend/girlfriend)

Julie	cry	discuss
school play	hallway	bell rings
audition	Scott	hug
cut	ask	class

Sample Narrative: Acne - Rich Secure Base Content

It was Sunday before the first day of school in eighth grade, and I looked in the mirror and was trying to decide what to wear. I was trying on all these outfits, and I discovered that I had a lot of pimples on my face. And I had always had pimples, but it just was more than the day before or the day before that. So I started to think that maybe I would be embarrassed the next day when I went to school, and maybe people would make fun of me. So I went down to talk to my mom, and she said that it's not that big of a deal. She had that problem and my father had that problem too. Acne is very common in teenagers. So she told me some stories about herself and problems that she had and she made me laugh, and she made me feel like it was OK. Then she said: "Why don't we go into the bathroom, and we'll try something, kinda like a little experiment." So I sat down and she asked me to close my eyes. And then she put makeup all on my face, but my eyes were still closed, so I didn't know what I looked like. Then she told me to open my eyes, and I looked and you could hardly see anything, and I was really happy. And I wasn't embarrassed or nervous to go to school the next day.

Sample Narrative: Acne - No Secure Base Content (mom doesn't offer any help)

It's Sunday morning. I woke up and went out to the bathroom. In the mirror I looked at my face and I saw some acne on my cheeks. I have a party that evening and I'm embarrassed to let my friends see me like this. I went to my mom and asked her if I could use some makeup. My mom doesn't allow me to use makeup because she thinks it will clog my pores and I'm too young to use makeup. I begged her to try some because I'm too embarrassed to let my friends see just to try and experiment. She said no and she told me that when she was young she also had acne. But back then they didn't have anything to apply. But just let it be, later on it will go away.

Sample Narrative: Tennis Match - Rich Secure Base Content

Three Saturdays after my practice lessons in tennis had begun, I had a championship to make on Saturday afternoon. I was pretty nervous about this championship, since I had never competed in tennis before. My dad asked me if I would like to talk about strategy to use against the opponent. I told him I really would, so he got out his training books from his youth, and started to talk to me about psychological strategy and actual strategy. We talked about how I should be feeling, what I should be focusing on, and which techniques I should use. Finally, he told me, that when the game was to begin, I should focus not on losing, but on what would be the best way to win, and what would be the best way to make sure I had put all of my energy into it. I began to play the game. In the first set, my opponent was very aggressive, and I began to become a little more passive, and afraid I would lose. I gave my father a look, ask him what I should do, but he just smiled back at me, and I knew what he thought I should do. I went to the side of the court when we switched sides, and decided to be equally aggressive if not more so than my opponent. I began to play as hard as I could, and by the end of the match, I was winning, one up. When I looked to my dad again, he just gave me a thumbs-up. That's how I knew I was doing the right thing.

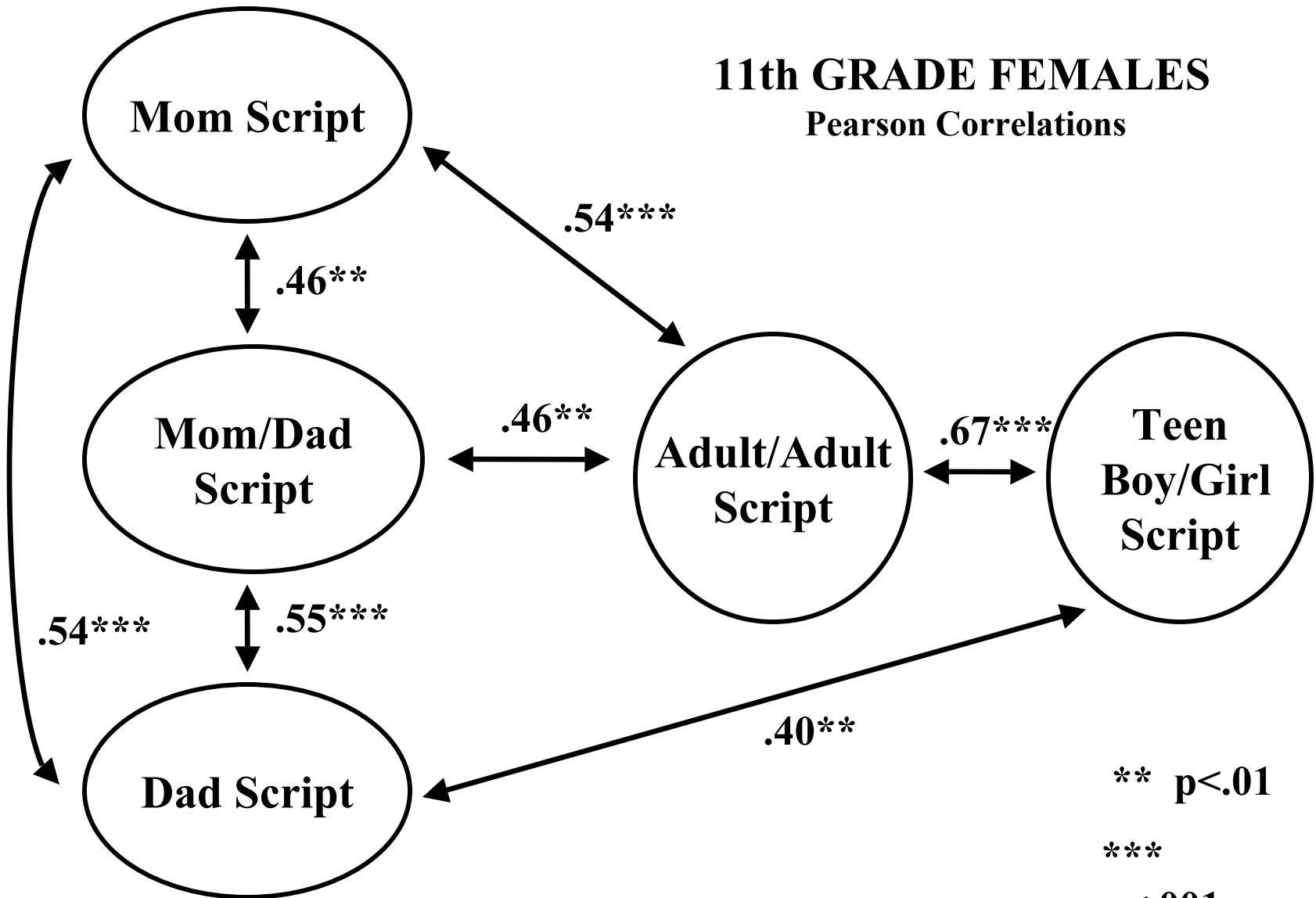
**Sample Narrative: Tennis Match - No Secure Base Content
(Child doesn't feel that Dad helps)**

So the big tennis championship was coming up, and in order for me to get in, I need to perform in the regionals first. And they were coming up soon. I was nervous. And my dad considers himself to be a pretty good tennis player. I don't know if he is, so, well I asked him about what we should do. And he gave me suggestions. We discussed my strategy, but just hearing it discussed doesn't help much. I actually have to get there and play. So my dad played a few rounds, and he thinks that if he just lets me win all the time, its going to raise my self-esteem, and make me feel better. But I always know that he's just going really easy so I would feel better. So we do that. And then the game begins with my opponent in the actual regionals. And I'm losing, and I'm blaming my dad for not going as good as he should when he played against me. I looked at him, and he's there. And he's giving me the thumbs-up sign. And that isn't helping either. And I think, well, next time I'm going to practice with someone who I know won't try to make me feel better.

DEVELOPMENTAL HYPOTHESES

- H1:** Both 8th and 11th grade adolescent females will show evidence of “Me and Mom” and “Me and Dad” secure base scripts.
- H2:** Older adolescents will show broad-based correlations among the 1st person and 3rd person attachment narratives suggesting a generalized secure base script at this age.
- H3:** Generalized scripts are built upon other family scripts (Mom & Dad) as well as personal scripts (Me & Mom, Me & Dad).
- H4:** General intellectual functioning (GPA, English grade) will not correlate with script scores at either age.

11th GRADE FEMALES
Pearson Correlations

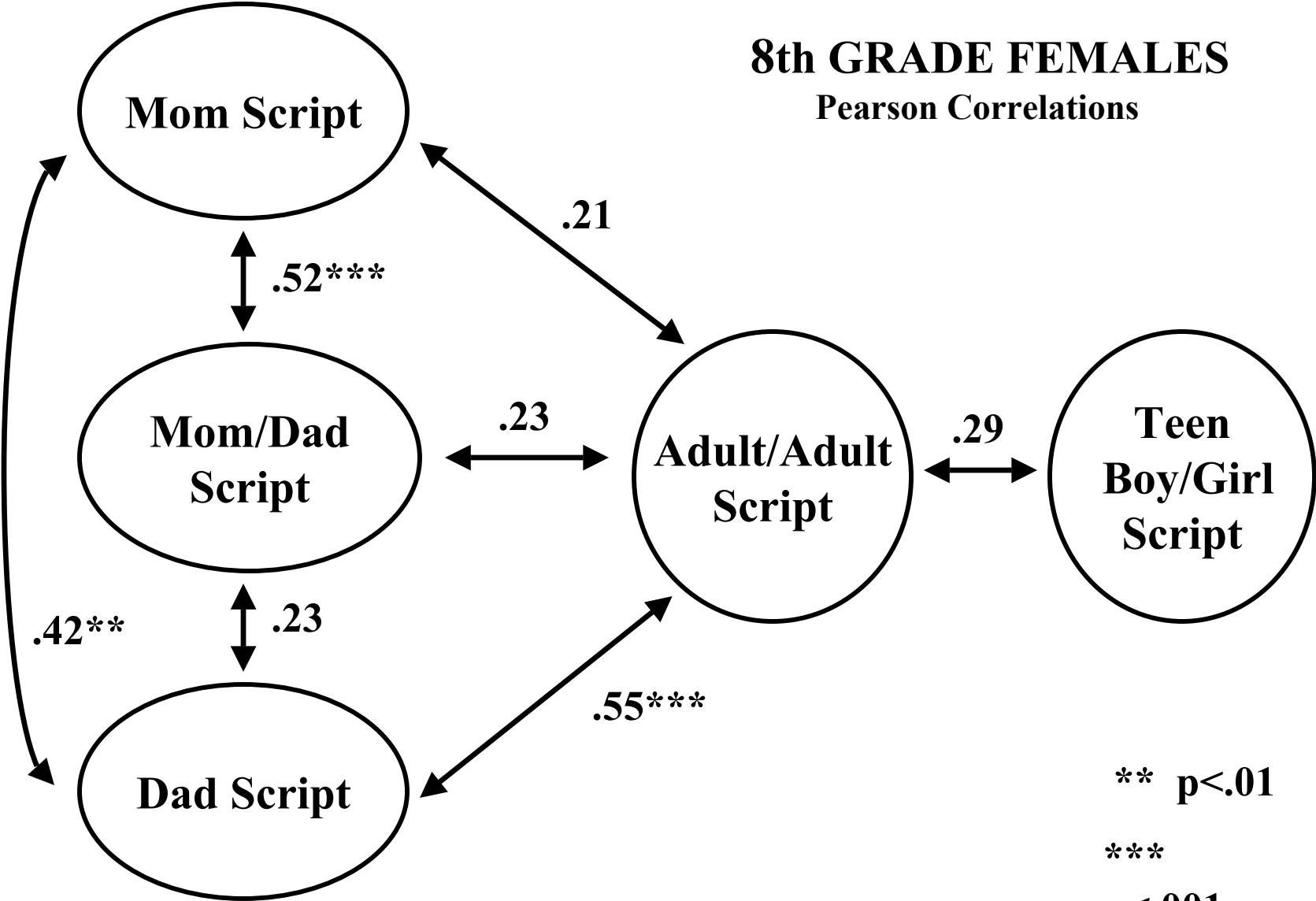


**** p<.01**

p<.001

8th GRADE FEMALES

Pearson Correlations



** $p < .01$

$p < .001$

KEY FINDINGS

(See figures with correlations)

- Script scores ranged from rich secure base content to moderate to none at all for all story types. There was clear evidence of secure base scripts at both ages.
- All family script scores were significantly correlated in 11th grade suggesting the girls had constructed a representation of their parents' relationship in part in accordance with their own personal scripts with each parent. In 8th grade only "Mom" script scores correlated with "Mom/Dad" script scores.
- In 11th grade both the "Mom" and "Mom/Dad" script scores made significant unique contributions to the generalized adult/adult script scores (supported by multiple regression analysis). Furthermore the adult/adult and boy/girlfriend script scores were highly correlated. These findings support the hypothesis that 11th graders have a generalized secure base script. No such pattern appears in 8th grade.
- Script scores were not correlated with GPA or English grade at either age.

CONCLUSIONS

The results gave clear indication that adolescents possess a secure base script that characterizes their personal relationships with their mother and father. By 11th grade these scripts correlate with script representations of their parents' relationship. Further-more, the correlations between family scripts and the more general, 3rd person scripts support the hypothesis that 11th graders have constructed a more generalized secure base script.

In contrast there is little evidence of a generalized script in 8th grade, although these younger adolescents do show evidence of personal secure base scripts (Me & Mom, Me & Dad scripts). These findings suggest that adolescence is an important time period in the elaboration/enhancement of attachment scripts. Future research should explore possible factors in this process. Family influences such as styles of communication, availability of parents, opportunities to observe the parental relationship, may all play a role. The possible role that a generalized script plays in the development of early close relationships (boyfriend/girl friend) should also be explored.