

Current Relationship Attachment Scripts: Correlates and Partner-specific Contributions

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ABSTRACT

The current study adapted the H. Waters and Rodrigues (2001, SRCD) narrative assessment of generalized scripts to assess relationship specific secure base beliefs in married couples. The goal of the study was to determine whether there is evidence of both relationship specific and generalized secure base beliefs in adults. Forty-eight women from the Stony Brook Relationships Project, now married for approximately 8-10 years, participated.

The relationship specific script assessment included both story prompts that organized “husband gives care” & “wife gives care” storylines. Script scores from the generated narratives were highly correlated across story types, providing evidence of a generalized relationship secure base script. Script scores were also correlated with both attachment measures (AAI, generalized script assessment) and relationship specific measures (Current Relationship Interview, secure base behavior). Multiple regression analyses indicated that the script scores reflected unique relationship specific variance as well as generalized attachment variance.

INTRODUCTION

In the course of development, we experience secure base support in a variety of relationships. Beginning in infancy, we construct and revise *specific* beliefs about our parents' availability and responsiveness. In addition, these beliefs are the starting point for more *general* beliefs about close relationships that are applied to our romantic relationships in adulthood. In turn, these romantic relationships are also the source of experience that leads to *specific* beliefs about a specific romantic partner, as well as to revisions of generalized beliefs rooted in earlier experience.

Since it seems likely that relationship specific and generalized secure base beliefs can have differential effects on behavior in current relationships, it is important to assess both relationship specific and generalized secure base beliefs. In the present study we adapted the H.Waters & Rodrigues narrative assessment of generalized attachment scripts to assess relationship specific secure base beliefs in married couples. The narrative methodology is easily modified to assess specific relationship beliefs, and has greater specificity in its scoring than other measures.

48 women from the Stony Brook Relationships Project, now married for approximately 8-10 yrs, participated. All had recently completed (within 2-3 yrs) the Adult Attachment Interview, the H.Waters & Rodrigues generalized script assessment, and the Current Relationship Interview.

SCRIPT MEASURES

Current Relationship Narrative Battery - Participants produced 4 relationship-specific stories (in the 1st person), two in which the husband and two in which the wife gives care. The relationship-specific prompt word outlines along with sample stories are presented in Table 1. Participants use the columns of words to frame a story, going from left to right. The words are only a guide and elaborations are welcome. After participants review each outline, a tape recorder is turned on & the generated passage is recorded. For each story there is a prototypic secure base script. All stories are scored on a 7-1 scriptedness scale by two independent raters. Alphas ranged in the low .90's.

Generalized Attachment Script Assessment - (H. Waters & Rodrigues, 2001). Uses word prompt outlines that frame attachment-related story lines (in 3rd person). Individuals produce narratives that are then scored on secure base scriptedness.

INTERVIEWS

Current Relationship Interview (CRI) - semi-structured interview that parallels the structure and content of the AAI, but with a focus on the current love relationship.

Adult Attachment Interview - semi-structured interview that elicits information about childhood experiences and the subject's ideas about the influence of those experiences. Assesses adult attachment security.

OBSERVATION

Videotaped Careseeking and Caregiving Behaviors - Couples are asked to discuss a current problem. Their videotaped behaviors are scored for secure base support.

IQ: Henmon-Nelson Test of Mental Ability - Used to assess verbal ability.

TABLE 1: CURRENT RELATIONSHIP PROMPT-WORD OUTLINES

Thanksgiving Preparations (husband gives care)

My husband and I	nervous	clean up
Thanksgiving morning	spill	doorbell
turkey	I cry	smile
oven	my husband	welcome

An Island Vacation (husband gives care)

My husband and I	walk	bed
beach	hotel	relax
food	vomiting	hug
I am sick	drink	sleep

CURRENT RELATIONSHIP PROMPT-WORD OUTLINES CONT.

A Difficult Decision (wife gives care)

My husband	pacing	bed
phone call	he's uncertain	awake
job offer	dinner	decision
surprise	we talk	hug

A Bicycle Trip (wife gives care)

My husband and I	pain	cold
bicycle	can't walk	wait
downhill	worried	hold
he falls	getting dark	rescue

Sample Narrative: Thanksgiving Dinner

(Rich secure base content)

My husband and I moved into our house in October and were very excited that we were able to have Thanksgiving at our house for the first time since we were married. That morning we woke up very early and prepared the Turkey and did all the things that you are supposed to do and put the stuffing inside and prepared some of the side dishes. We put it in the oven and prayed. I was very nervous at about two o'clock when the turkey was done. I usually get very nervous when we are having company and I usually start barking orders and yelling and screaming at everybody around me. And this day was no exception. My daughter, who was quite young at the time, was underneath my feet. When I opened the oven door to take out the turkey, I did not notice that my daughter was right behind me and I tripped and I spilled the turkey, and the pan, and the juice all over the floor. I was so upset that I started to cry, and I got very emotional. I was convinced that our thanksgiving was going to be a disaster. But my husband just cracked up and thought that it was the funniest scene. And I am not sure that he was laughing at me, or at the fact that we had no turkey to eat. But he got two paper towels and he picked up the turkey off the floor and he put it back in the pan. And he cleaned up the mess. I was very upset because I could not make good gravy because the juice had fallen all over the floor. So he opened two cans of turkey gravy, put it on the stove and we vowed that we would not tell anybody that the turkey had fallen on the floor. And just then the doorbell rang, and he went to the door and he let in our guests and welcomed them. And after thanksgiving dinner was over and everyone complemented me on how wonderful the turkey was, my husband and I just looked at each other and smiled, because we were the only ones who knew what had happened.

Sample Narrative: Thanksgiving Dinner

(Little secure base content: Husband is a problem more than a help, wife is angry as well as upset, but somehow gets through it.)

Of course I had to have Thanksgiving at our house because nobody else could do it, even though I'm working full time and nobody else works. But I'm the one that always has to have the holidays. So my husband and I, of course, invited everybody to our house, but it always seems like me doing all the work. So Thanksgiving morning I get up really early, 6 o'clock, to put the turkey in the oven. And I'm working around doing all my stuff, getting the kitchen ready, cleaning the house. I got dressed, took a shower. I mean, I was really nervous. All these people were coming over. And of course everything looked beautiful, but as I was working around, he comes in and he spills gravy all over everything: all over the table, on the tablecloth. It was a mess. So I'm crying, I was so upset. And he, my husband, he's just walking around like nothing's a problem. He's just having a grand old time. I'm there cleaning everything up. I have to clean up this, clean up that. The doorbell rings. He goes to the door with a big smile on his face, having invited everybody in. I'm still in the kitchen. I'm a mess. The place looks a wreck. Anyway, we have dinner. Everything goes fine. They leave. You think somebody could even bother to say "You're welcome," or "Everything was fine," or "You welcomed us really nice into your home." They don't say a thing. And that, after all day of all the work I did for Thanksgiving, that's the thanks I get.

Sample Narrative: A Bicycle Trip

(Rich secure base content)

Last weekend my husband and I decided that we needed some quiet time without the children. I called up my parents and luckily they were able to baby-sit all three of them. We decided what to do. At first we thought we might go to a movie. And we decided that the weather was too beautiful and, we decided to take a bicycle ride. We decided to go to Rocky Point bicycle trails. And when we met there we noticed that even though it was empty it was a beautiful day. And even though we weren't familiar with the trails we decided to try it. There were winding paths and we were just having a lot of fun chatting and, talking and being free really from the children. We got to one part where it was a pretty steep down hill, but we decided that we would just continue cause we decided to go the full circle and go back to the car. As we were going down we were both able to do it with no problem. But he must have hit a rock or something because I heard him yell. I was a little bit ahead of him and I turned around and it turns out that he had fell. I stopped the bike right away and stared going back up hill towards where he was. He said that he was in a lot of pain and he was holding his leg. I decided that since he was so much bigger than me maybe I would try to let him stand up and see if he was able to walk. He held onto my shoulder and we couldn't even take one step. He said "I can't walk. I'm in too much pain". I was really worried but I didn't want to show it, but I just remembered we had left out cell phones back in the car. It was starting to get dark and I knew that even though it was a beautiful day tonight it was suppose to be cold, also. I was debating whether I should leave him there alone and go back to the car and use the cellphone to call. And together we decided that we would just wait it out and either see if the pain would go away or someone else would pass. I held his hand and we sat on the side and it took a little while but in about a half hour another couple had passed us and ask if we needed help. Luckily they had their cellphone and they were able to call 911 and we were rescued. And we were taken back and Anthony was taken to the hospital and it turned out to be just a fracture.

Sample Narrative: A Bicycle Trip

Little or no secure base content: Wife is focused on herself and on meeting a new friend

My husband and I went to South Carolina. We rented a place in Hilton Head and we decided to take a bicycle ride. We're riding all around and no idea where we're going. We get to this steep hill. My husband thinks he's Joe Bicycle Rider and he starts riding down the hill really fast. I said, "Slow down, you're gonna fall. Slow down, you're gonna fall." He's not listening to me. There's a puddle in the sidewalk where he's riding and he decides to go around the puddle. He goes around the puddle, flips over the handlebars, and goes into a pile of dirt, which I assumed was dirt, and is complaining about his ankle. He gets up. I'm trying to help him up. His ankle—he's in a lot of pain. I'm getting really worried. I have no idea where I am, how am I going to get him back. And all of a sudden he starts screaming he has red ants on his hands. He's wiping the red ants off his hands. They bit him all over. His ankle is killing him and it's getting dark now. I am getting so, so nervous. I'm dying of thirst, I don't know what to do, I have no idea where I am, and I haven't seen a car in two hours. So finally I said, dusted him off, I said, "Why don't you sit on my bicycle, drag mine, and I'll pull you back. I don't know where I'm going, but I'll pull you back." I pull him back to a main road and there was a nice gentleman in a pickup truck that pulled over and he asked if he could help us. I explained the situation. He got my husband in the car, put the bikes in the back, and I also got in the truck with him. He offered us a cold drink and said, "I'll take you to the nearest hospital." I said, "But where is that?" He said, "Oh, about an hour away." So, it was nice of him to do that. We got to the nearest hospital. We get into the hospital and it winds up that he broke his leg. I thank the young man for bringing us there. I paid him for some gas and thanked him for his rescue. He said, "Don't worry about it." Once my husband was done, he drove us back to where we were staying. It was a horrible experience, yet it's funny how a tragic thing happens, you meet a nice person and it winds up being you have a new friend.

RELATIONSHIP-SPECIFIC HYPOTHESES

H1: Convergent Validity

Correlations within and across the two husband and two wife “give care” stories will be significant indicating that the narrative battery successfully taps into a relationship-specific secure base script.

The relationship script scores will correlate significantly with other attachment measures and with relationship-specific measures.

H2: Discriminate Validity from Generalized Script

“Within” correlations of individual partner-specific stories are higher than “across” correlations with generalized stories

Relationship-specific script scores will make a significant unique contribution to the Current Relationship Interview above that of generalized script scores indicating that they reflect unique relationship-specific variance.

H3: Discriminate Validity from General Intellectual Functioning

Relationship-specific script scores will not correlate with IQ scores.

CONVERGENT VALIDITY - SCRIPT SCORES

Within Husband Stories	.60***	Across Husband and Wife Stories	.71
Within Wife Stories	.68***		

CORRELATIONS AMONG RELATIONSHIP-SPECIFIC AND GENERAL ATTACHMENT MEASURES

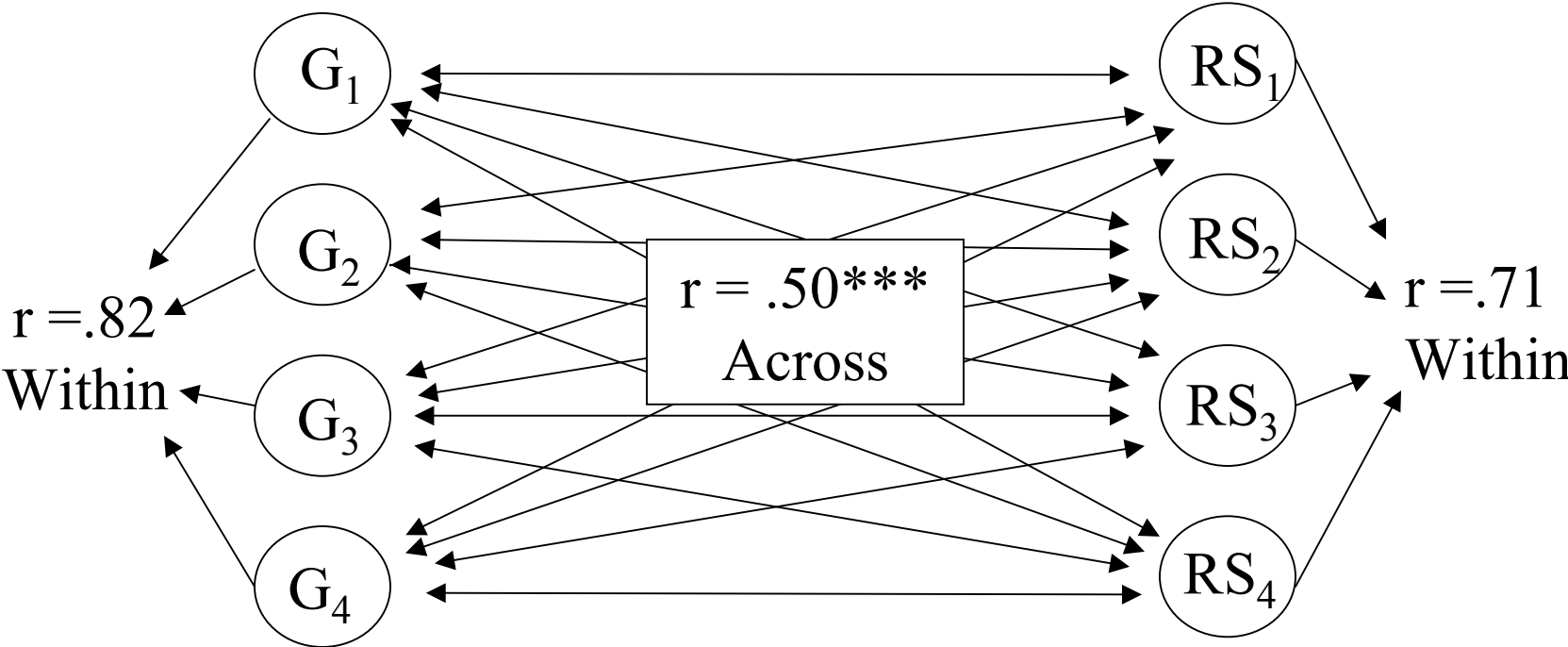
		CRI	AAI
	Generalized	Attachment Script	
Relationship Script			
Husband gives care	.36**	.27	.42**
Wife gives care	.40**	.41**	.51***
Composite scores	.41**	.39**	.50***

** p < .01 *** p < .001

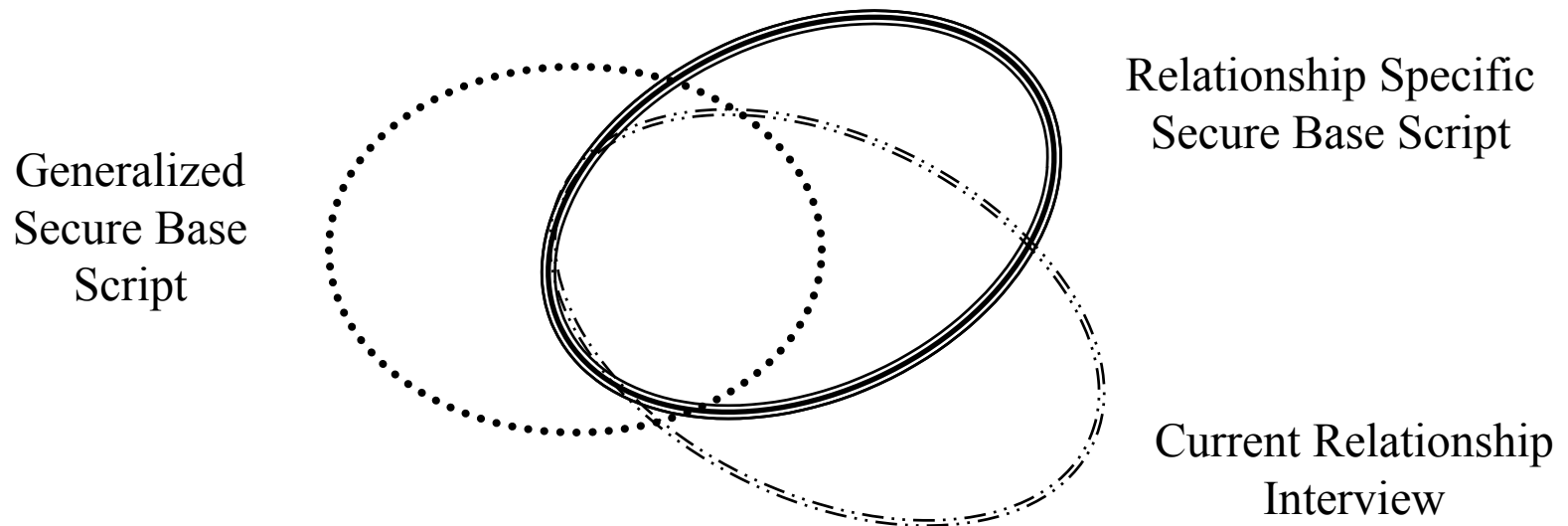
Convergent And Discriminant Validity Of Generalized And Relationship Specific Script Use

**Generalized
(Third Person)
Prompt Word Sets**

**Relationship Specific
(Me & My Spouse)
Prompt Word Sets**



Relations of Current Relationship Interview To Use Of Generalized and Relationship Specific Secure Base Scripts



Multiple R : .43** (partner script, general script, CRI)

Partial R : .28* (unique variance: partner script, CRI)

BUILDING BLOCKS OF RELATIONSHIP-SPECIFIC ATTACHMENT SCRIPTS
CORRELATIONS AMONG PRE-MARRIAGE ASSESSMENTS
& CURRENT RELATIONSHIP SCRIPTS

Relationship Script	CRI 3 months pre-marriage	AAI 3 months pre-marriage	Secure Base Behavior Care-Giving
Husband gives care	.20	.16	.32*
Wife gives care	.21	.47**	.40**
Composite	.23	.33*	.38*

Note: 39 of the 48 participants had been assessed during the first phase (3 months prior to marriage) on the current relationship interview (CRI) & Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) as well as the video-taped secure base behavior assessment.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

KEY FINDINGS

- Script scores within and across husband-give-care and wife-give-care story types were highly correlated providing clear evidence of a relationship-specific secure base script.
- As anticipated, the relationship script scores correlated significantly with other attachment measures (AAI & generalized attachment script scores) and with relationship-specific measures (CRI & care giving behavior).
- Multiple regression analyses indicated that relationship script scores contributed unique variance to CRI coherence scores when entered along with generalized attachment script scores, supporting the hypothesis that they reflect relationship-specific variance.
- Pre-marriage assessments of the AAI and secure base behavior between the partners correlated with relationship script scores assessed 8-10 years later, suggesting they are important building blocks for the relationship script.
- Relationship script scores were not correlated with IQ.

CONCLUSIONS

The results gave clear indication that the narrative word prompt technique that H. Waters & Rodrigues developed to assess attachment scripts can be adapted to assess relationship-specific scripts. Furthermore, these scripts are generalized scripts that contain both husband giving care and wife giving care components. Future research will have to determine whether the strong level of intercorrelation among story types is apparent early in marriage. The current sample was of women married for 8-10 years.

The relationship script scores correlated both with attachment measures and with relationship specific measures. Multiple regression analyses indicated that the relationship script scores reflected significant relationship-specific variance as well as generalized attachment variance.

Finally, both pre-marriage assessments of secure base behavior and attachment status (AAI) made unique contributions to the relationship specific script scores. This intriguing finding suggests that both attachment representations and attachment relevant behavior guide the development of relationship-specific representations.