

Strength of Attachments

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Norman K. Lee". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned centrally on the page.

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Purpose of Thesis

The purpose of my thesis was to use a questionnaire on family attachments to see the degree of attachment that males and females had toward their significant others and their mothers. I also wanted to see if there was any correlation between males and females concerning their relationships with their significant others and their mothers.

Overview

From Harlow's classical experiment with monkeys to our own personal observations of human nature, we have seen that human beings have a desire to form attachments with others. Attachment is defined as a close emotional bond between an infant and the caregiver(Santrock, 1992). However, many psychologists have used the term "attachment" outside the realm of infancy to describe a close, intimate relationship between two individuals(Bee & Mitchell, 1984). Throughout an individual's life, he/she continually forms attachments to others. Starting in infancy with an attachment to a caregiver, individuals use this attachment as a base to form attachments with siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, friends, a spouse or a partner, and his/her own children. At a particular age during the life span, one attachment with another person is probably more important and stronger than any other attachments. While an infant's primary attachment is with the caregiver, for most adults, the central attachment is with a partner or spouse(Bee & Mitchell, 1984).

Although an individual's relationship with his/her spouse or partner may be the central attachment in early-middle adulthood, he/she maintains a relationship with parents and siblings(Troll, 1985). Two studies, one by Leigh(Bee & Mitchell, 1984) and the other by Troll, show that the statement seems to be true. In a cross-sectional study, Leigh interviewed a group of adults in 1964 and a different group of adults in 1976. He found that adults continued to keep in contact with family members well into

adulthood. When the individuals were asked why they kept in contact, most adults said that they felt close to and enjoyed the contact with their family. The conclusions of Troll's study also support the statement concerning family attachments in early and middle adulthood. In her study, she used residential contiguity and frequency contact as determinants in the maintenance of family relations. From her results, Troll found that when family members lived proximally, visits were regular and frequent, and when they lived distally, contact was maintained by telephone and letter writing. By the individual studies of Leigh and Troll, the statement that adults in early-middle adulthood maintain family attachments is supported by their conclusions.

Method

Subject

For my study, I chose to have twenty-four subjects, twelve males and twelve females. In choosing a subject, I looked for an adult who fit the following criteria: early or middle aged, has a spouse or a partner and knows his/her mother. The subjects I chose range in age from twenty to thirty-five, have a spouse or partner and know their mothers. Also, most of my subjects are actuarial science or math majors.

Materials

In 1976, Troll and Smith designed a questionnaire to measure the strength of attachments (Bee & Mitchell, 1984). The questions cover many different aspects of attachment, and the strength of an attachment is measured by the "Total Score", which is obtained by adding up the points of each question. Because I could not locate Troll and Smith's original scale, I was unable to find out what a particular "Total Score" signified. Instead of measuring an attachment solely on its own score, I decided I would compare the average score for each question of the females with respect to their significant others and mothers to the average score for each question of the males with respect to their significant others and mothers.

Procedure

I had each of my subjects take the survey home with them overnight and complete the questionnaire at his/her leisure--first with respect to his/her significant other, then with respect to

his/her mother.

Results

To prove the hypothesis that family attachments are maintained in early-middle adulthood, I needed to establish a set of variables. While the dependent variable is the strength of the attachment(average score for each question), the independent variable is the subject's relationship to the individual.

After averaging the scores for each question for the males and females separately for both attachments, I was able to make several observations. By comparing the scores of the current study with the highest and lowest score possible for each question, it can be seen that both the males' and the females' scores for their significant others and their mothers are close to the highest score possible for each question. For most of the questions, the subjects' answers regarding the two different attachments are similar. However, a few differences do exist that are noteworthy. For the question regarding the "amount of influence the person has on you", females rated both attachments higher than males did. As for the question "you owe something to", males rated both attachments higher than females did. Similarly, males rated "approving/disapproving" and "feeling responsible for" higher for their significant others and their mothers than females did for these questions.

Discussion and Conclusions

Because the scores of the tests for both males and females are close to the highest score possible for each question, all of the relationships can be considered strong attachments. If the score is considered to be equivalent to the strength of the attachment, from my results, one would conclude that both males and females have a stronger attachment with their significant others. Also, while males have a stronger attachment to their significant others, females have a greater attachment to their mothers. This supports the assumption that the relationship with a spouse or partner is the strongest attachment in early-middle adulthood.

Most subjects reported living in a different neighborhood or state than their mother, but still make frequent contact with them--once a week or more. The data corresponds with Troll's conclusions that family relationships are maintained by visits, telephone calls, or letter writing.

Although I have made some conclusions, I have been hasty not to make too many generalizations because the study has many limitations. The limitations include the subjects and the questionnaire. First of all, I used only twenty-four subjects. They were not a random sample of college students because most have very similar interests in actuarial science and math. Since these subjects' have strong math backgrounds, they may have similar interests that might not exist among a random sample of college students. Because each individual has life experiences that may be unique to him/her, his/her attachments with family members could be

very different than those of the subjects'. Also, Gilligan(Santrock, 1992) has said that intimacy may be a more central factor in a female's life than in a male's life. This may be one reason why a lot of males and females have so many problems with relationships. Therefore, I would assume that males and females may rate attachments differently. And, as with any other questionnaire, how honestly a subject answered the questions is also a factor that may affect the outcome.

Besides the subjects contributing limitations to the study, the questionnaire I used also has some drawbacks. The Family Attachment Scales used in the study was a condensed version. Although the questions are varied, the condensed version offers only a limited number of questions. Second of all, because I could not obtain the original scale made by Troll and Smith, I was unable to find out how they used the scale and how to assess the strength of an attachment based on the "Total Score". In addition, all of the questions are rated differently, and therefore, are harder to analyze. There was also a discrepancy with a few of the questions. In answering question number one, many of the subjects were confused about the word "intimately". They were not sure if this meant sexual involvement with the person or just a very close relationship. For my purposes, I assumed the word "intimate" meant a very close relationship with another person. Also, some of the subjects thought that "owing something to" meant owing money to the person, rather than owing your accomplishments to the person. Although the study has many limitations, I do think that some truth

does exist in the results that I obtained.

References

- Bee, H.L., & Mitchell, S.K. (1984). The Developing Person: A Life-Span Approach, 2nd ed. New York: Harper & Row.
- Troll, L. (1985). Early and Middle Adulthood, 2nd ed. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Santrock, J.W. (1992). Life-Span Development, 4th ed. Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown.

Family Attachment Scales

1. Know personally (now or at the time of death)
 1. don't know at all
 2. know slightly
 3. know casually
 4. know well
 5. know intimately
2. Amount of influence this person has on you (as of now)
 1. no influence--know very little about
 2. some influence
 3. moderate influence
 4. strong influence
 5. mirror image
3. Contact frequency (now or at the time of death)
 1. have never been in contact with
 2. in contact with a few times in life
 3. in contact with several times a year
 4. in contact about once a month
 5. in contact frequently--once a week or more
 6. live with or see daily
4. Residential contiguity (as of now)
 0. not alive
 1. lives in a different country
 2. lives in a different state
 3. lives in a different city, but in the same state
 4. lives in a different neighborhood
 5. lives in the same neighborhood
 6. lives on the same street
 7. lives in the same house
5. Strength of relationship (as of now)
 1. neutral, indifferent toward person
 2. mild interest
 3. moderate interest
 4. moderately strong feeling toward (+ or -)
 5. very strong feelings for (+ or -)
6. Quality of relationship (3 2 1 0 -1 -2 -3)
 - a. love hate
 - b. like dislike
 - c. approve disapprove
 - d. accept reject
 - e. admire despise
 - f. want to be like want to be different from
 - g. would seek out would avoid
 - h. would expect support disapproval from
and get approval from

7. You owe something to
0. not at all
1.
2.
3. very much
8. You feel responsible for
0. not at all
1.
2.
3. very much
9. You feel obligated to keep in touch with. If dead, feel obligated to remember in ritual.
0. not at all
1.
2.
3. very much

Total Score: (Add up the points for each item)

Source: Troll and Smith, 1976, pp. 166-167.

(Bee & Mitchell, 1984)

Family Attachment Scales for Significant Other and Mother

| Question Number | Significant Other | | Mother | |
|--------------------|-------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Males | Females | Males | Females |
| 1 | 4.583 | 4.833 | 3.916 | 4.416 |
| 2 | 3.333 | 4.000 | 2.833 | 3.583 |
| 3 | 5.750 | 5.583 | 4.500 | 4.916 |
| 4 | 5.416 | 4.833 | 2.416 | 3.333 |
| 5 | 4.750 | 4.833 | 4.166 | 4.583 |
| 6a | 2.833 | 2.916 | 2.583 | 2.833 |
| b | 2.916 | 2.833 | 2.333 | 2.500 |
| c | 3.000 | 2.500 | 2.333 | 2.083 |
| d | 2.916 | 2.750 | 2.500 | 2.500 |
| e | 2.583 | 2.333 | 2.333 | 2.333 |
| f | 1.250 | 1.250 | 1.250 | 1.000 |
| g | 2.666 | 2.666 | 1.833 | 2.000 |
| h | 2.666 | 2.833 | 2.500 | 2.333 |
| 7 | 2.166 | 1.916 | 2.416 | 1.916 |
| 8 | 2.416 | 2.083 | 2.083 | 1.500 |
| 9 | 2.666 | 2.833 | 2.333 | 2.666 |
| Total Score | 51.910 | 50.995 | 42.328 | 44.495 |