Attachment Relationships in Emerging Adulthood: Implications for Counselor Education and Supervision

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Attachment Relationships in Emerging Adulthood:

Implications for Counselor Education and Supervision

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Bowlby (1969) conceptualized the initial proposed theory of attachment, which outlined aspects of a significant bond that existed between two individuals: a mother and her infant child. Ainsworth was able to build on attachment theory and conduct the first empirical study on attachment (1963, 1967). Later, the seminal “strange situation” experiment took place (named as such because the study examined the impact of a stranger’s presence on a child when the child’s mother was or was not present), which highlighted the attachment anxiety that babies could experience when separated from an attachment figure (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Although attachment relationships typically begin in the family with the mother, they could also include the father (Bowlby, 1973, 1980, 1988). Hierarchy, which highlights the attachment relationships in one’s life from most significant to least significant (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994). No significant gain for attachment relationship with a family member versus those who experience an attachment relationship with a peer (Pitman & Scharfe, 2010). Attachment relationships can be created with parents, siblings, and close friends (Bowlby, 1988; Bretherton, 1992; Hazan & Zeifman, 1994).
**Definition of Terms**

- **Emerging Adulthood**
  - Distinct and necessary stage of development (Arnett, 2000; Buhl and Lanz, 2007)
  - Culturally constructed stage (Arnett, 1998; Nelson, Badger and Wu, 2004)
  - Significance of parental and peer relationships (Tanner, Arnett, and Leis, 2009; Collins and Van Dulmen, 2006)

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Arnett (2000)—coined phrase; experienced between adolescence and young adulthood
Distinct from adolescence: have the ability to move away from home and are released from the parental guidance (Arnett, 2000 & 2004)
Distinct from young adulthood: they typically are not married, do not have children, and do not have stability in terms of a career path (Arnett 2000 & 2004)
Arnett 1998—Experienced in industrialized countries worldwide
Significance of parental relationships—shift experienced in parental relationships during emerging adulthood (Tanner, Arnett & Leis, 2009)
Peer Relationships—perceived as significant attachment relationships during emerging adulthood (Collins & Van Dulmen, 2006)
The Impact of Attachment Working Models and Social Support on the Subjective and Psychological Well-Being of Emerging Adults in Transition

Study #1
Rationale

- Emerging adulthood is a life period marked with many significant transitions (e.g., leaving home, entering careers)
- Evidence that these transitions are critical periods for well-being & psychological distress (Lane, 2013; Lee & Gramotnev, 2007)
Purpose of the Study

- Test a theoretical model predicting the nature of relationships among attachment, social support, and two types of well-being for emerging adults who were experiencing life transition
  - *Subjective well-being*: life satisfaction, positive affect (Diener, 1984)
  - *Psychological well-being*: general psychological health & functioning (Ryff, 1989)
Why Attachment?

- Attachment relationships inform internal beliefs regarding the capabilities of self & others.

- These internal beliefs are theorized to become “activated” during times of distress (Fraley & Davis, 1997).
Why Social Support?

- Healthy social relationships “buffer” stress (Coble, Gantt, & Mallinckrodt, 1996)

- The importance of social support in emerging adulthood has repeatedly been demonstrated (e.g., Murphy et al., 2010)

- Social support and attachment are interrelated constructs that are predictive of psychological distress (Mallinckrodt & Wei, 2005)
Limitations in Existing Research

- Attachment, social support, and aspects of well-being have only been examined among adult populations in general.
- Existing emerging adult research has examined attachment or social support, not both.
- Concerns regarding previous well-being research:
  - Lack of theoretical rationale for choice of well-being constructs (i.e., differentiating subjective & psychological well-being).
  - Over-focus on negative aspects of well-being (distress, depression, anxiety, etc.).
Proposed Model
Procedure

- 213 emerging adults who reported being presently involved in one or more life transition (e.g., first semester of college, first year of employment)
- Online survey consisted of instruments measuring attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, satisfaction w/ social support, subjective well-being, & psychological well-being
Data Analysis

- Structural Equation Modeling
  - Estimated relatedness of variables
  - Assessed fit of theoretical mediation model
  - Compared model fit with several other plausible alternative models
- The significance of the mediation effects were tested using bias-corrected bootstrap analysis (Shrout & Bolger, 2002)
Results (final model):
Results

- All direct relationships were statistically significant in the hypothesized directions

- All mediation relationships were statistically significant

  - Actual model suggested by data:
    Attachment → Social Support → Psy.WB → Sub.WB
Practical Applications

For counselors:

- Importance of interpersonal functioning & developing supportive relationships for emerging adults
- Anticipate attachment anxiety & avoidance barriers with clients (cf. Daly & Mallinckrodt, 2009; Mallinckrodt, 2000)

For theory:

- Social support explains relationship of attachment on well-being for emerging adults in transition
- Is happiness a byproduct of psychological health?
Parent and Peer Attachment as Predictors of the Perceived Experiences of Emerging Adulthood

Study #2
Emerging adulthood has received attention and come to be viewed as a unique stage of development, distinct from both adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Researchers have sought to highlight various factors which comprise this developmental stage (see MacMillan, 2007; Nelson et al., 2007; Scharf & Mayseless, 2010; Sneed, Hamagami, McArdle, Cohen, & Chen, 2007). Attachment theory provides a lens through which individuals can conceptualize the factors that collectively occur during emerging adulthood.
Rationale

- Although emerging adulthood has a theoretical framework (Arnett, 2000), the ways that emerging adulthood are related to and impacted by other factors that are important to development are still unknown.

- Much research related to attachment has been explored as it relates to college students rather than through the lens of emerging adulthood as a developmental stage.
Rationale

- Research can increase understanding of the relationship between attachment and emerging adulthood—more specifically, how relationships seem to impact emerging adulthood.

- Aim to equip counselors with a developmentally-informed framework to address to work with emerging adult clients (which can impact assessment, case conceptualization, treatment methods, and the therapeutic relationship as a whole).
The survey was created on Survey Monkey so that all participants who fit the inclusion criteria could be emailed a link to participate in the study. The test creators for both the IPPA and the IDEA granted permission for the inventories to be used as part of an online survey.

9,747 = number of KSU students who are undergraduates between the ages of 18-20; Email used because students who take the survey can be tracked in order to ensure that necessary sample size is achieved; email addresses provided by KSU research bureau provide school ID number (to gain access to survey & to ensure participants only take the survey once); email used to track participants through survey monkey and remove duplicate survey submissions.

checked a box indicating that they were thereby giving consent to participate in the study.
Participant data that was transferred into SPSS included information from the demographic sheet, responses to questions from the IPPA, and responses to questions from the IDEA. Survey responses and SPSS data were maintained by the researcher for this study in order to ensure that confidentiality was maintained on behalf of the participants using an alpha level of .05 to achieve statistical significance. The purpose of maintaining the alpha level was to eliminate the potential of a Type I error. In addition, the beta level will also be maintained in order to eliminate the potential for a Type II error.

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all of the demographic variables as well as for the dependent variables (scores on the IPPA and IDEA). Normality was tested using a histogram. Linearity was tested via a scatterplot. Univariate analysis was conducted to gain descriptive statistics on each of the variables in this study. Bivariate analysis was conducted to analyze the relationship between various pairs of variables in this study, and multivariate analysis was conducted to simultaneously analyze multiple variables in this study.

The type of multiple regression used in this study was the standard model, which is also referred to as simultaneous regression (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Standard regression allows all variables to be entered into the regression equation at the same time, which allows for each independent variable to be analyzed in terms of its impact upon the dependent variable after all other variables have been entered into the regression equation (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).
The determination to treat parental and peer attachment equally is underscored by findings that suggested no distinct benefit occurred for individuals whose primary attachment relationship was with parents rather than those whose primary attachment relationship was with peers (Pitman & Scharfe, 2010). With this in mind, it seems that it is the strength of attachment relationships rather than the source of attachment relationships which seems to predict wellbeing in individuals.
Results

- Peer attachment was positively correlated with emerging adulthood; parent attachment was not significantly correlated with emerging adulthood.

- Significant differences due to gender were identified regarding which factors associated with parent and peer attachment predicted experiences of emerging adulthood.
Attachment and Emerging Adulthood

- Peer attachment predicted the following experiences of emerging adulthood:
  - HIGHER levels of possibilities
  - HIGHER levels of self-focus
  - LOWER levels of instability
Stepwise Regression (Men)

- Peer Trust (Primarily)
- Peer Alienation (Secondarily)
- Experiences of Emerging Adulthood
Stepwise Regression (Women)

- Peer Communication (Primarily)
- Peer Alienation (Secondarily)
- Experiences of Emerging Adulthood
Attachment and Emerging Adulthood

- Peer attachment was significantly related to emerging adulthood in this study, but parent attachment was not significantly related to emerging adulthood.

- Counseling implications:
  - How do prior and current relationships impact a client’s sense of self, sense of well-being, and life-stage experiences?
  - How might attachment relationships impact a client’s experiences as an emerging adult?
  - How are presenting concerns related to or impacted by the connection between attachment relationships and experiences of emerging adulthood?
Implications for Counselor Educators and Supervisors
CACREP Standards

- 8 common core curricular areas includes Human Growth and Development (2009 CACREP standards, p. 11)
  - Theories pertaining to individuals and families (including transitions) across the life span
  - Theories pertaining to resilience
  - Theories pertaining to wellness and the facilitation of optimal development

- The relationship between attachment relationships and emerging adulthood can be discussed within each of the above domains
Best Practices for Counselor Educators

- Include curriculum on emerging adulthood within Human Growth and Development curriculum
- Empower students to understand and utilize the emerging adulthood framework in order to enhance assessment, diagnosis, and treatment modalities
- Highlight the IDEA as an assessment tool
Best Practices for Supervisors

- Inform supervisees about the relationship between attachment and emerging adulthood
- Look for EA characteristics with emerging adult supervisees and/or supervisees working with EA clients
- Highlight the use of the IDEA with emerging adult clients
- Discuss implications for assessment, diagnosis, and treatment from an emerging adulthood perspective