

# The Relation between Attachment to Opposite Sex Parents and Attachment to Romantic Partners

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## Abstract

*This study examined the relation between attachment to opposite sex parents and attachment to romantic partners. Previous research has indicated that attachments to parents closely resemble attachments to romantic partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). However, little research has examined whether attachment to the mother or father is more predictive of attachment to romantic partners, and whether this varies by gender. The present study surveyed 236 college students about their attachment to parents, as well as romantic partners. We hypothesized that attachment to opposite sex parents would be significantly related to attachment with romantic partners. Results indicated that those who exhibit trust, communication, or alienation with opposite sex parents show significant positive correlations with fearful attachment styles to romantic partners. Furthermore, attachments to same sex parents showed similar results. This study can provide an important contribution to the understanding of how trust, communication, and alienation from parents influences adult romantic relationships.*

## Introduction

Attachment theory emphasizes the importance of strong affectional bonds across the life span (Bowlby, 1979). According to Ainsworth (1989), young people learn from interactions with their parents how to initiate and maintain satisfying relationships. Moreover, previous research has indicated that attachment styles with parents may be carried forward into adult romantic relationships (Carnelly, Pietromonaco, Paula, & Jaffe, 1996; LePoire et al., 1997). However, little research has examined whether the attachment style to the mother or father is more predictive of attachment styles to romantic partners, and whether this varies by gender. Although attachment styles to same sex parents will be analyzed, the purpose of the present study is to examine the relation between attachment styles to opposite sex parents and attachment styles to romantic partners as we expect attachment to opposite sex parents will be more predictive of attachment to romantic partners.

## Attachment theory

Attachment theory was pioneered by John Bowlby, who observed behaviors in infants and young children that had been separated from their primary caregivers (usually mothers). Bowlby (1982) noticed that children separated from their primary caregivers proceed through predictable emotional reactions, such as *protest*, *despair*, and *detachment*. Bowlby (1969) asserted these behaviors are evolutionary as infants lack the ability to nourish and protect themselves. Hence, infants seek and maintain close proximity to select others, namely, primary caregivers. Furthermore, children who have available, sensitive, and responsive caregivers form secure attachment styles, and tend to explore their environment (Bowlby, 1988), whereas children whose caregivers are consistently unavailable, insensitive, and unresponsive become anxious, jealous, and insecurely attached. Insecurely attached children generally do not explore their environment and experience extreme distress in absence of an attachment figure. Bowlby (1989) observed that when attachment figures return from absence, insecurely attached children become anxiously ambivalent or avoidant, while children with secure attachment styles appear blithe. Finally, Bowlby (1979) believed attachment behavior learned in infancy characterize the individual from the “cradle to the grave” (p. 129).

## Attachment transference

Individuals apply their working models of attachment to future romantic relationships: thereby transferring attachment styles from one relationship to the next (LePoire et al., 1997; Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2006). McElwain and Volling (2004) revealed that by age four, effects of attachment, security, and parental sensitivity experienced during infancy are manifested in friendship quality. Their research suggests attachment, security, and parental sensitivity are catalysts for development of trust, happiness, and communication experienced in future relationships. Those individuals who demonstrate more positive and loving relationships with parents experience more trust, comfort, and communication with romantic partners (Black & Schutte, 2006). In addition, interactions with parents help children form mental representations of self-worth and self-concept (Gabriel, Carvallo, Dean, Tippin, & Renaud, 2005; Park, Crocker, & Mickelson, 2004), playing a vital role in the development of social skills, relational competence, and adolescent emotional adjustment (Engels, Finkenauer, Meeus, & Dekovic, 2001). Furthermore, research has confirmed the effects of romantic involvement on attachment transfer from parents to romantic partners (Feeney, 2004), and suggests catalysts for attachment styles in infancy, such as trust, caregiving, and intimacy are positively associated with development of adult romantic relationships (Fraley & Davis, 1997).

## Opposite sex parents and romantic partners

Hazan and Shaver (1987) successfully applied the theoretical framework of attachment theory to adult romantic relationships and explained romantic love as an attachment process. Their research suggests the prevalence of attachment styles in infancy, such as *secure attachment*, *anxious/ambivalent attachment*, and *anxious/avoidant attachment* are relatively the same as in adulthood. Moreover, results indicated romantic attachment styles are significantly related to experiences with parents. However, most significant for the present inquiry were the findings that respondents described their opposite sex parents more favorably, and same sex parents more critically. For example, women described their fathers as more loving and less critical, whereas men described their mother more loving and less critical. Finally, research supports the belief that individuals seek romantic partners who resemble their opposite sex parents both physically and emotionally (Collins & Read, 1990; Black & Schutte, 2006).

## The present study

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relation between attachment styles to parents and attachment styles to romantic partners. A great deal of research has shown attachment styles are transferred from parents to romantic partners (LePoire et al., 1997; Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2006). However, little research has examined whether attachment styles to the mother or father is more predictive of attachment styles to romantic partners, and whether this varies by gender. The primary focus of this study is on attachment to opposite sex parents, as those relationships are expected to be more predictive of attachment to romantic partners than will attachment to same sex parents. The present study hypothesized that attachment to opposite sex parents will be significantly correlated with attachment to romantic partners, whereas attachment to same sex parents will not.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 236 college level students. Participants include freshman (70%), sophomores (22%), juniors (5%), and seniors (3%). Participants consisted of 113 males and 125 females. Participants were drawn from the Introductory Psychology participant pool at a large public university in the Pacific Northwest. The majority of participants were Euro-Caucasian (85%), with smaller numbers of African American (2%), Hispanic (7%), Asian (2%), and 'Others' (4%). All participants were treated in accordance with the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (American Psychological Association, 2001). The Institutional Review Board approved all study procedures before data collection began.

## Materials

*Attachment to parents.* Attachment styles to parents were assessed using the Inventory of Parental and Peer Attachment (IPPA) developed by Armsden and Greenberg (1987). For the purpose of this study, the IPPA was administered twice - once to assess attachment to the mother and once to assess attachment to the father. The IPPA is a self-report instrument containing 53 items measuring perceived attachment styles with respect to trust, communication, and alienation. Participants were asked to rate themselves on a 5-point Likert-type scale the degree to which the items describe their feelings experienced in close relationships, with (1) *almost always or always true* to (5) *almost never or never true*. The IPPA was scored by summing the totals of each of the three subscales: trust (10 items), communication (10 items), and alienation (8 items). In addition, reverse scoring was required for responses to negatively worded items. The IPPA attachment ratings show convergent validity with Family Environment Scale ratings (Moos, 1974), as well as Tennessee Self-Concept Scale ratings (Fitts, 1965). Moreover, internal reliabilities (Chronbach's alpha) for the three scales are trust = .91; communication = .91; and alienation = .72.

*Attachment to romantic partner.* The Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ) developed by Griffin and Bartholomew (1994a, b) specifically measures perceived attachment styles with romantic partners. The RSQ a 30-item self-report instrument measuring the four prototypical adult attachment patterns: secure (5 items), dismissing (5 items), preoccupied (4 items), and fearful (4 items). Participants rate the extent to which each statement best describes their characteristic style in close relationships on a scale from 1 = *not at all like me* to 5 = *very like me*. Scores for each attachment pattern are calculating by averaging the four or five items for that subscale.

## Procedure

Participants completed the survey in a classroom outside of class time. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, and if at any time they became uncomfortable with the questionnaire they were free to withdraw without penalty. Participants were informed results will be used for research purposes only. The anonymous 120 item questionnaire took 25–30 min. to complete.

## Results

To examine whether attachment styles to both opposite sex and same sex parents are significantly correlated with attachment style to romantic partners, Pearson's  $r$  correlations were computed between each parental attachment dimension and each romantic attachment style. As will be discussed below, significant correlations were found between both attachment style to opposite sex parents and attachment styles to romantic partners and attachment style to same sex parents and attachment styles to romantic partners. These correlations are displayed in Table 1.

### Male attachments patterns

There was a significant positive correlation between father-son trust and fearful attachment styles to romantic partners, but no significant correlations were found between father-son trust and secure, pre-occupied, or dismissive attachment styles. Furthermore, there was no significant correlation between mother-son trust and attachment styles to romantic partners. A significant negative correlation between father-son communication and secure attachment styles to romantic partners was found. In addition, there was a significant positive correlation between father-son and mother-son communication and attachment styles to romantic partners, such as fearful and pre-occupied. There was a significant positive correlation between mother-son alienation and dismissive or fearful attachment styles to romantic partners. Moreover, mother-son alienation displayed a significant negative correlation with secure attachment styles to romantic partners. Finally, researchers found a significant positive correlation between father-son and mother-son alienation and fearful or pre-occupied attachment styles to romantic partners.

## Female attachments patterns

Women who exhibited trusting relationships with their fathers were more likely to possess fearful and pre-occupied attachment styles to romantic partners, but no significant correlations were found between father-son trust and secure or dismissive attachment styles. Furthermore, there was a significant negative correlation between mother-daughter trust and secure attachment styles to romantic partners. However, there was a significant positive correlation between mother-daughter trust and fearful attachment styles to romantic partners, but no correlation was found with pre-occupied or dismissive attachment styles. Father-daughter and mother-daughter communication was found to have a significant positive correlation with exhibiting fearful attachment styles to romantic partners. In addition, there was a significant positive correlation between mother-daughter communication and dismissive attachment styles to romantic partners. Results suggest there is a significant negative correlation between father-daughter alienation and secure attachment styles to romantic partners. Moreover, there was a significant positive correlation between father-daughter alienation and fearful attachment styles to romantic partners, but no correlation was found between father-daughter alienation and pre-occupied or dismissive attachment styles to partners. Mother-daughter alienation was found to have a significant negative correlation with secure attachment styles to romantic partners. Finally, there was a significant positive correlation between mother-daughter alienation and fearful, pre-occupied, and dismissive attachment styles to romantic partners.

Table 1. Correlations between Attachment to Parents and Attachment to Romantic Partners

	Secure	Fearful	Pre-occupied	Dismissive
<i>Male:</i>				
Father Trust	-0.16	.29**	0.06	0.07
Mother Trust	-0.08	0.17	0.15	0.10
Father Comm.	-.23*	.27**	0.05	.23*
Mother Comm.	-0.10	.21*	0.05	.20*
Father Alien.	-.27**	.37**	0.13	0.10
Mother Alien.	-.27**	.34**	0.08	.28**
<i>Female:</i>				
Father Trust	-0.13	.20*	.22*	0.01
Mother Trust	-.18*	.23*	0.13	0.13
Father Comm.	-0.11	.29**	0.06	0.18
Mother Comm.	-0.11	.30**	0.08	.19*
Father Alien.	-.38**	.37**	0.06	0.18
Mother Alien.	-.41**	.47**	.23*	.27**

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

## Discussion

The present research was conducted to examine the relation between attachment to opposite sex parents and attachment to romantic partners. We hypothesized that attachment to opposite sex parents would be significantly correlated with attachment to romantic partners, whereas attachment to same sex parents would not. The results demonstrated that attachment to both opposite sex parents and same sex parents play an important role in comparison to attachment with romantic partners. These findings taken with previous research (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) suggest that attachment dimensions, such as trust, communication, and alienation experienced between parents and their children are significantly related with attachment to future romantic partners.

Our hypothesis that attachment to opposite sex parents would be significantly related to attachment with romantic partners was supported by significant positive correlations between alienation experienced with parents and insecure attachment styles to romantic partners. These findings were expected as previous research has indicated that individuals form working models of attachments, and carry them forward into adult romantic relationships (Feeney, 2004; Fraley & Davis, 1997; LePoire et al., 1997). Hence, individuals experiencing alienation from parents would expect and fear alienation from romantic partners. However, to our surprise results also indicated a significant positive correlation between trust and communication experienced with parents and insecure attachment styles to romantic partners. For example, participants who demonstrated more positive and secure attachments to parents exhibited more negative and insecure attachments to romantic partners. This finding appears to contradict previous research as a negative correlation would be expected (Black & Schutte, 2006). One explanation for this aberrant finding is the majority of our sample exhibited insecure attachment styles to romantic partners, whereas previous research has indicated a majority identifying with secure attachment styles to romantic partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Furthermore, contrary to our hypothesis attachment to opposite sex parents was not shown to be more predictive of attachment to romantic partners as same sex attachments showed similar correlations. In addition, whereas women were more attached to their opposite sex parent, men were more attached to their same sex parent.

## Limitations

Although the present study contributes an important understanding of how trust, communication, and alienation from parents influences adult romantic relationships there are a number of limitations that need to be considered. First, participants were asked to recall previous attachments to parents, as well as romantic partners. Thus, it can be argued that memories of previous attachments are less than perfect, and not an entirely accurate representation of actual experiences. Second, external validity was diminished by utilizing the Introductory Psychology participant pool which ranged in age from 18-21. The narrow age gap of participants hinders the ability to generalize findings to the general population. Finally, the majority of participants (80%) were not currently in romantic relationships. Future research should replicate the present study utilizing a more diverse population, as well as more romantically involved participants.

## Conclusion

The data revealed by the present study suggests that attachment to both opposite sex parents and same sex parents play an important role in the development of attachment styles to romantic partners. In this study, trust, communication, and alienation experienced between parents and their children seemed to have a negative impact on future adult romantic relationships. For example, men and women who experienced more trust, communication, or alienation with parents exhibited more fearful and insecure attachment styles to romantic partners. Consequently, early childhood attachment formations to parents are crucial to the individual's self-esteem, happiness, and security experienced in future romantic relationships. Clinical implications include providing interventions to address the relation between attachment to parents and attachment styles to romantic partners. Moreover, by addressing parental attachments as correlates of attachment styles to romantic partner's counselors may contribute to a reduction in the myriad of marriages ending in divorce.

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