



Exploring Intergenerational Attachment Transmission: How are children's attachment styles affected by changes in their caregiver's attachment?



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Abstract

Past studies have researched various connections between attachment styles of children and parents. However, no studies have explored how changing parents' attachment style could impact change in children's attachment style. This research proposal aims to investigate the relationship between caregiver attachment and child attachment change. We hope to recruit 100 parent-child pairings from schools and therapy clinics. Subjects will complete attachment measuring scales pre- and post parent-treatment. Parents will have 10-15 sessions of EFT to increase secure attachment. Attachment change differences will be analyzed through one-way ANOVA methods. We hypothesize that as parents' secure attachment increases, their children's will too.

Introduction

- Researchers have explored the impact that parents have on their children's attachment styles and development (Bowlby, 1988, Bretherton, 1992) and a correlation between parent's responsiveness and child attachment styles exists (Gebhardt & Hoss, 2022).
- Later research has demonstrated that our needs for connection continue throughout our lifespan and affect our function (Johnson, 2019).
- Secure attachment in children has been shown to have positive effects such as improved cognitive functioning, mental and physical health, and more positive social-emotional competence (Ranson & Urichuk, 2008).
- In adults, secure attachment is linked to positive feelings of self/others, increased trust, resiliency, and emotion regulation (Ognibene & Collins, 1998, Simmons et al., 2009; Wiebe et al., 2016).
- Attachment-based therapies such as Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) aim to increase secure attachment and improve emotional bonds (Johnson, 2009).
- While we have grown in our understanding of attachment bonds, studies have yet to examine if changes in a parent's attachment style will also result in changes of their child's attachment style. With our research, we hope to bridge this gap.

Primary Aim and Hypothesis

- RQ:** Does a change in parental/caregiver insecure attachment style to parental secure attachment style impact a child's attachment style?
- H:** As parents increase in secure attachment, their children's secure attachment will also increase.

Methods

Participants

- The target population for our study is 100 caregiver/child pairings. We are looking to sample caregivers with at least one elementary school-aged child (ages 6-12).
- Participants will be recruited from both therapy clinics and elementary schools.
 - Recruitment will be accomplished by contacting elementary schools throughout King County by using flyers and information sessions during parent/teacher conferences.
 - Recruitment will be accomplished by making participation in this study an option for adults currently enrolling in attachment-based therapy services such as EFT and qualify to participate.
- Caregiver/child pairings who are interested will be screened through an online survey.
 - To meet the criteria, adults must be caregivers of at least one child between the ages of 6-12 and must be a long-term legal guardian (i.e. foster parents and non-custodial adults excluded). Adults must also be willing/available to participate in 10-15 sessions of an attachment-based therapy model (EFT).

Procedures

- Caregivers will be given the caregiver survey (including questions regarding demographic information and the RAAS-revised adult attachment scale) upon starting the study before treatment (S1). All children will also be given the child survey (consisting of the Children's Attachment Style Scale) before treatment (S1).
- Caregivers will then participate in 10-15 sessions of an attachment-based treatment: EFT to increase their secure attachment. Sessions will be facilitated by licensed therapists such as LMFTs with 5 years of experience in EFT.
- Caregivers will be given the caregiver survey (without the demographic information questions) after treatment (S2). All children will also be given the child survey again (S2).

Measures

Change in Caregivers' Attachment Styles

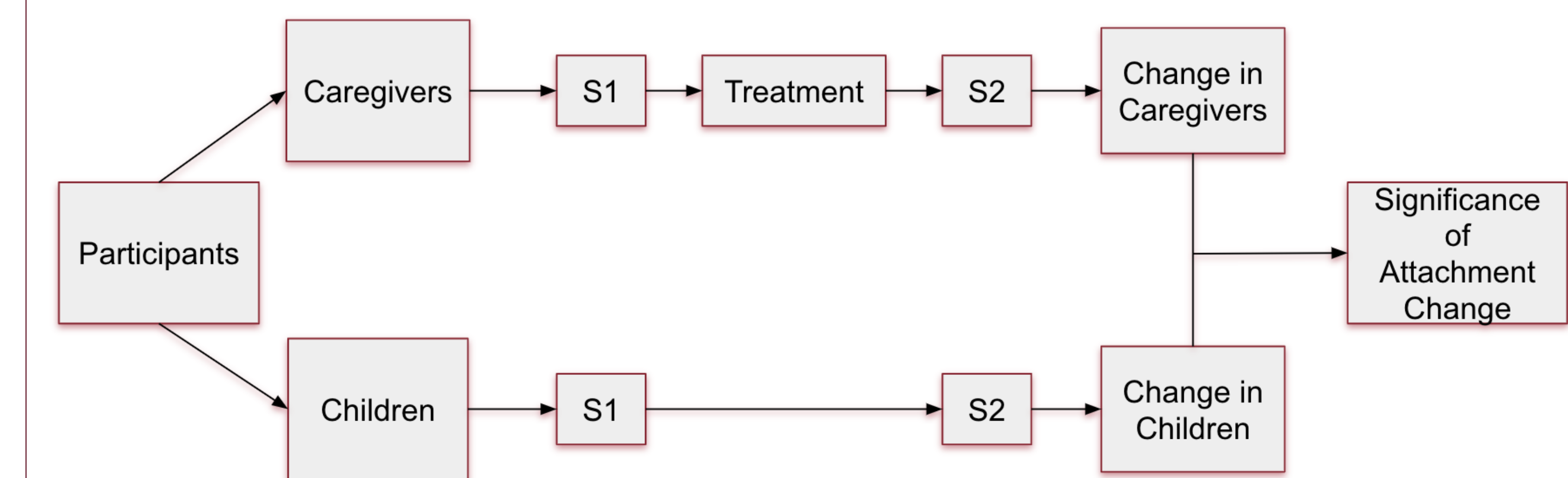
- To measure the caregivers' attachment styles, caregivers will be given a survey consisting of the 18 items from the Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS; Collins, 1996) at S1 and S2.
- The differences in scores and differences in the evaluations of scores between S1 and S2 will be compared to measure the change in caregivers' attachment styles.

Change in Children's Attachment Styles

- To measure the children's attachment styles, children will be given a survey with the 15 items from the Children's Attachment Style Scale (CASS; Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2004) at S1 and S2.
- The differences in scores and evaluations of scores between S1 and S2 will be compared to measure the change in children's attachment styles.

Results

- Results of the study will be analyzed to measure whether a change in the caregiver's attachment style (from insecure to secure) will create a statistically significant change in the child's attachment style. This will be accomplished by comparing the change in results from S1 and S2 between both caregivers and children.
- Statistical analysis will be performed using one-way ANOVA methods.



Discussion

Social Implication

- While past research has shown the impact of parent-child attachment work, our research study would be unique in that it would show whether changes in parental attachment would result in corresponding shifts in their child's attachment.
- Additionally, our findings could help steer the public away from pathologizing or scapegoating children, highlighting instead the equal importance of parental/household efforts.

Clinical Implications

- This research could illustrate how attachment styles can change (i.e. not fixed) and further emphasize the importance of engaging in attachment work for healthier relationships.
- Our research seeks to further show the significance of family dynamics, by showing the relevance of familial relationships in shaping our lives, and the need for systemic work.
- Secondary outcome: our findings would further highlight the validity of EFT as a model for increasing secure attachment.

Limitations

- Our sample size and potential homogeneity of sample groups in Western culture could impact the generalizability of findings. Furthermore, our emphasis on one long-term legal guardian and one-child pairings could result in narrow outcomes/gaps in data.
- Additionally, as children are engaged in the active process of developing their attachment style, this developmental process may make the child-scales less applicable/accurate than those used with adults.
- Lastly, the limited timeframe of 10-15 sessions may not provide sufficient time for changes, as working from insecure to secure attachment is often ongoing.

Further Research

- Future research should delve into the mechanisms of change, exploring factors contributing to the shifts in attachment styles; more than transference/transmission.
- Future studies should readjust their methodology to accommodate more inclusive groups and non-traditional caregiver-child pairings. This could involve investigating multiple attachment figures (i.e. non-legal guardians such as adult siblings, mixed families, etc.) and children to provide a more comprehensive understanding of outcomes.