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The relationship between parental attachment and sexuality in early adolescence

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This study questions the links between the young adolescents quality of attachment to the mother and father (secure, ambivalent or avoidant) and the sexual behaviours reported by early adolescents. Two questionnaires were completed by 312 French middle-school students (mean age: 13.8 years) to test attachment style and sexuality (emotion, intention and relation). Ambivalent attachment was related to greater sexual involvement than to secure attachment. Avoidant attachment to the mother was associated with emotional disinvestment in sexuality. Avoidant attachment to the father appears to influence sexual decision-making, especially for girls. These results support an individuated conception of attachment patterns with differential influence of dyadic relationships and could provide a better understanding of adolescent sexual behaviour.

Keywords: attachment styles; sexuality; romantic relationships; adolescence

Introduction

Adolescence is a developmental period marked by significant changes in and reorganisation of family and peer relationships. Adolescents gradually distance and acquire emotional and behavioural autonomy, leading to investment in extrafamilial relationships (peers, romantic partners) (Atger, 2006; Botbol et al., 2000; Fraley, Davis, & Shaver, 1998). This autonomy is not based on detachment from the parents, but on individuation in relation to them. During adolescence, attachment functions are transferred from parents to peers, and eventually to a romantic partner (Koepke & Denissen, 2012). This tendency to diversify and reorientate emotional engagement underlines the importance of friends and romantic relationships for feelings of security in adolescence. In this stage, the reorganisation of the hormonal, anatomic and neuropsychological changes is profound and confronts adolescents to their emerging sexuality (Fortenberry, 2013). Early adolescents should integrate sexual attitudes, feelings and experiences into a developing sense of self. This exploration is considered as a natural process in achieving sexual maturity and offers a context for youth to explore various facets of relationships (Tolman & McClelland, 2011).

Attachment theory has shown that this movement of distantiation and the creation of new relationships are determined in part by the style of early attachment. Indeed, once an internal working model has been established in infancy, a person tends to perceive future events through the filter of that model. It is applied to all relationships, including romantic

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relationships. People with a secure attachment style develop stable relationships, closeness and confidence in others (Allen, Porter, McFarland, McElhaney, & March, 2007; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). In contrast, insecure people develop a negative image of themselves and an attitude of distrust or reliance towards others, relationships tending to become sources of frustration and dissatisfaction (Blanchard & Miljkovitch, 2002). More precisely, people with an ambivalent attachment style tend to have conflictual relationships and be dependent on others. Their relationships are characterised by fear of being abandoned and not being loved (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002). Insecure avoidant people tend to feel uncomfortable with intimacy and be emotionally distant (Birnie, McClure, Lydon, & Holmberg, 2009; Collins & Read, 1990). Recent research (Cyrlunik, Delage, Blein, Bourcet, & Duprays, 2007; Lopez & Gormley, 2002) has also shown that under certain circumstances (a facilitating environment and a resilient personality), or after the first romantic relationship, insecure patterns can become more secure. Surprisingly, regarding attachment relationships in adolescence, relatively few research examines the differential influence of mother and father attachment on adolescent development or includes both the mother's and father's evaluations. Several researchers reported findings (e.g. Buist, Dekovic, Meeus, & van Aken, 2002; Liu, 2008; Rice, Cunningham, & Young, 1997) that have different consequences in adolescents: attachment to father is more related to social competence (peer group interaction). Moreover, these findings not take into consideration that patterns of interaction in family relationships depend both on parent and on adolescent gender (Russel & Saebel, 1997).

Several studies have examined the links between attachment styles and sexuality in adulthood, highlighting a link between secure attachment and greater sexual satisfaction (Birnbaum, Reis, Mikulincer, Gillath, & Orpaz, 2006; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004), sexual activities with fewer partners and closer relationships (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002; Paul, Fitzjohn, Herbison, & Dickson, 2000; Schachner & Shaver, 2004). In adults, an ambivalent pattern of attachment is associated with more presexual activity (e.g. cuddling, kissing, sexual fondling, necking, petting, etc.) (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2004), but with less communication and sexual satisfaction (Birnbaum, 2007; Davis et al., 2006; Feeney, Peterson, Gallois, & Terry, 2000). During adolescence, ambivalent patterns tend to lead to earlier and more frequent sexual intercourse, especially among girls (Tracy, Shaver, Albino, & Cooper, 2003). Avoidant attachment is particularly associated with emotional detachment in sexuality (Birnbaum et al., 2006; Davis et al., 2006). This attachment style is associated with avoidance of intimacy, either by avoiding any presexual and sexual activity (Birnbaum, 2007; Birnbaum et al., 2006; Brassard, Shaver, & Lussier, 2007; Davis et al., 2004; Davis et al., 2006) or by multiplying superficial and short-term relationships (Davis et al., 2006; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Paul et al., 2000). These same characteristics are found in late adolescence (Tracy et al., 2003).

Only a few studies have examined the connection between parental attachment style and romantic relationships and sexual experience in adolescence (e.g. Feeney et al., 2000; Tracy et al., 2003), focusing on late adolescence or adolescence in general. There have been no studies on early adolescence (i.e. middle high school – between the ages of 12 and 15). This stage marks the beginning of usually experiencing platonic love, without physical contact, and adolescents above 14 years old try to take advantage of relationships with dates, caressing and casual relationships followed by genital or extragenital relationships (Costa, Lopes, Souza, & Patel, 2001). Cognitive changes and progressive involvement in bodily exploration (one's own or that of another) already occur during this period (O'Sullivan & Brooks-Gunn, 2005). This exploration of sexuality simultaneously allows satisfaction of new attachment needs, and security and satisfaction of sexual needs

(Thériault, 2004). These psychological changes can lead early adolescents to take sexual risks (sexual precociousness, instrumental sexuality, multiple sexual partnerships) (Doljanac & Zimmerman, 1998; Meschke, Bartholomae, & Zentall, 2002). This study focused on the previously uninvestigated period of early adolescence, extending earlier work on mid- and late adolescence. Its aim was to explore the link between relevant dimensions of sexuality (sexual and presexual activities, romantic attachment and intention to engage in sexual activity) and attachment to parents. Based on attachment theory and following this logic, early adolescents having a secure attachment are expected to have lower scores on sexual involvement and higher scores on emotional investment in sexuality than insecure attachment styles. The second hypothesis is: adolescents having an ambivalent attachment are expected to have lower scores on sexual involvement and on intention to engage in intercourse than with any of the other attachment styles. The third hypothesis proposes that early adolescent with an avoidant attachment will be more accepting of sex without love. However, in some of these studies, mother and father attachment were not measured separately. Due to the findings indicating the differential effect of fathers' and mothers' involvement in adolescents' psychological well-being (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; for a review, see Rohner & Veneziano, 2001), in this study we examine separately the specific weight of each parental figure's attachment in adolescents' sexuality. Dyadic family relationships (mother–daughter, mother–son, father–daughter and father–son) will be taken into account for each hypothesis to determine if the relationships between attachment style and adolescent sexual behaviours vary according to dyadic relationships.

Method

Participants

The sample was composed of 312 secondary school children (seventh and ninth grades), attending public middle schools in Tours and its suburbs (département of Indre-et-Loire, France). This ensured that the sample covered a broad social and geographic mix. In terms of the parents' socioprofessional categories, for fathers: 21% ($n = 49$) were in high (executives), 35% ($n = 82$) average and 44% ($n = 105$) low (unskilled worker) categories. While for mothers, the percentages were 12% ($n = 28$), 36% ($n = 82$) and 51% ($n = 115$), respectively. Seventy-one percent of adolescents lived in urban areas ($n = 164$) and 29% ($n = 68$) in rural areas. There were 52.6% ($n = 164$) girls and 47.4% ($n = 148$) boys; mean age was 13.8 years (SD 1.02, range 10.7–16.9), with no significant difference between boys and girls (M age = 13.8, SD 1.0 in both cases; age range: 11.5–16.9 for girls and 10.7–16.2 for boys $F(1,287) = 0.01$, ns). The age of 61% of adolescents was 14 years or less ($n = 177$). There were no specific differences between educational establishments.

Material

The following questionnaires were used to investigate parent–adolescent attachment style and sexuality in early adolescence.

The interest, emotions, relationships scale (IERS)

To measure dimensions of sexuality in adolescence, we used the sexuality scale, interests, emotions, relationships scale (IERS) (Courtois, Potard, Réveillère, & Moltrecht, 2011). This scale has 15 items measuring three significant aspects of sexuality in early

adolescence (12–15 years). These three dimensions are: (1) ‘Going out with someone’, evaluating engaging in sexuality and the intensity of sexualisation of relationships (cuddling, kissing, sexual intercourse, etc.) (e.g. I have already had sex with a boy/girl); (2) ‘Giving priority to love’, measuring the need to be in love or not to have sex (emotional dimension) (e.g. I plan to wait to find someone I love before having sex). A preference for sexual relationship involving affection is considered as a more integrated attitude in relation to sexuality. And (3) ‘Flirting with the aim of having sexual relations’, evaluating the intention or desire to be sexually active (e.g. I plan to have sex as soon as the opportunity arises). This scale measures the early adolescents’ intention to engage in intercourse and orientation to engage in sex in the near future. This self-report questionnaire used a six-point Likert scale. Scores were obtained by calculating means. The Cronbach’s alphas were 0.78, 0.68 and 0.63, respectively. In our sample, under 2% ($n = 5$) of the adolescents did not complete this questionnaire.

The inventory of peer and parental attachment (IPPA)

For the attachment measurement, we used the inventory of peer and parental attachment (IPPA), based on Armsden and Greenberg’s three-dimensional model (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Vignoli & Mallet, 2004). The IPPA consists of 28 items, 14 for the mother and 14 for the father. It is a self-report questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale response format (never/almost never true, not very often true, sometimes true, often true and almost always/always true). It is designed for adolescents and measures their perceptions of the positive and negative affective/cognitive dimension of relationships with each parent (sources of psychological security). It is composed of three dimensions: ‘Communication’ (quality of communication), ‘Trust’ (degree of mutual trust) and ‘Alienation’ (extent of anger and alienation). The theoretical framework of this questionnaire is attachment theory. Overall quality of attachment to parents, respectively, was defined as the degree of trust and communication relative to Alienation (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Furthermore, in this study, subscale scores are used to classify attachment styles among adolescents. The scores on these three scales thus enable us to characterise attachment styles of adolescents to their mother and father (secure, ambivalent or avoidant). In our sample, 11% ($n = 35$) of adolescents reported that they had no contact with their father, and 2% ($n = 6$) reported that they had no contact with their mother for various reasons (death, family breakdown, unknown mother or father). These adolescents did not complete the IPPA. A few adolescents were not included in the attachment analyses, either because data were missing for one or more of the IPPA items (1%, $n = 3$ for father attachment and 1%, $n = 3$ for mother attachment), or because scores on three dimensions of the IPPA did not correspond to any attachment style (27%, $n = 84$ for father attachment and 9%, $n = 29$ for mother attachment). Ultimately, the attachment style to the father was determined for 190 adolescents (61%), and to the mother for 274 adolescents (88%). Internal consistency (alpha) coefficients for the IPPA’s three subscales ranged from 0.86 to 0.91. In the present study, for attachment to mother, Cronbach’s alphas ranged from 0.85 to 0.91 and from 0.73 to 0.91 for attachment to father.

Procedure

After the agreement of the schools, the parents and the teenagers had been obtained, the questionnaires were completed during class in the presence of the teacher and a researcher.

The ethics of the study (confidentiality, anonymity, right of refusal) were explained. Each participant was given their own questionnaire. Classes were randomly selected.

Data analysis

We used variance analysis (ANOVA) to compare attachment and sexuality by gender and attachment style. For significant ANOVAs, planned comparisons were run to test the schema group contrasts (between secure, ambivalent and avoidant attachment). Statistical analyses were performed with Statistica (version 9.0, Statsoft, France).

Results

Comparison of attachment and sexuality by gender

Attachment

The IPPA allows the attachment styles of adolescents to be categorised from three dimensions ('Communication', 'Trust' and 'Alienation'). There were significant differences between boys and girls for the dimensions paternal 'Communication' [$F(1,273) = 4.59, p < 0.05$] and maternal 'Trust' [$F(1,304) = 5.1, p < 0.05$], boys scoring higher on both dimensions. **Table 1** shows the distribution of the three attachment styles (secure, insecure ambivalent and insecure avoidant) for the whole sample. There were significant differences between boys and girls for attachment style to the mother ($\chi^2 = 6.07, dl = 2, p < 0.05$), with more boys than girls showing secure attachment.

Sexuality

The IERS questionnaire measures the levels of sexual involvement (behaviour), romantic involvement (emotion) and intention to begin sexual activity (intention). **Table 2** presents the mean scores and standard deviations for the sexuality assessment. Comparison of the scores for girls and boys on the three subscales revealed no significant difference for 'Going out with someone' [$F(1,307) = 0.39, ns$], but a significant difference for 'Giving priority to love' [$F(1,307) = 9.14, p < 0.001$] with girls scoring higher than boys, and for 'Flirting with the aim of having sexual relations' [$F(1,307) = 28.37, p < 0.001$] with boys scoring higher than girls.

Comparison between attachment styles and sexuality in early adolescence

Sexuality: comparison between attachment styles to the mother

With regard to the three styles of maternal attachment, there were significant differences between groups for 'Going out with someone' [$F(2,268) = 3.20, p < 0.05$]. Planned comparison between secure attachment and ambivalent attachment shows $F(1,268) = 6.25, p < 0.01$: adolescents with an ambivalent attachment scored higher on this dimension. Planned comparisons between secure attachment and avoidant

Table 1. Distribution of maternal and paternal attachment styles.

	Secure attachment	Ambivalent attachment	Avoidant attachment
To mother	55.5% ($n = 152$)	20.8% ($n = 57$)	23.7% ($n = 65$)
To father	68.9% ($n = 131$)	21.6% ($n = 18$)	9.5% ($n = 41$)

Table 2. Mean scores (and SD) of French early adolescents in sexual assessment.

	Going out with someone	Giving priority to love	Flirting with the aim of having a sexual relations
For the mother			
Secure attachment	-0.29 (2.43)	0.20 (2.33)	0.10 (2.47)
Ambivalent attachment	0.69 (2.52)	0.29 (3.05)	-0.33 (2.51)
Avoidant attachment	0.12 (2.78)	-0.66 (2.28)	0.02 (2.8)
For the father			
Secure attachment	-0.28 (2.48)	0.14 (2.66)	0.16 (2.31)
Ambivalent attachment	0.49 (2.83)	-0.45 (2.00)	-0.10 (2.27)
Avoidant attachment	0.82 (2.90)	0.88 (1.60)	0.53 (2.31)

attachment, and between ambivalent attachment and avoidant attachment, revealed non-significant interactions, $F(1,268) = 7.54$, ns, and $F(1,268) = 9.81$, ns, respectively. For 'Giving priority to love', the ANOVA was significant, $F(2,268) = 3.05$, $p < 0.05$. Comparison of secure and ambivalent adolescents indicated a non-significant effect [$F(1,268) = 0.05$, ns], but there was a significant difference between secure attachment and avoidant attachment [$F(1,268) = 5.25$, $p < 0.05$] and between avoidant attachment and ambivalent attachment [$F(1,268) = 4.31$, $p < 0.05$], adolescents with avoidant attachment scoring lower in each case. No significant differences were found for 'Flirting with the aim of having sexual relations', $F(2,268) = 0.58$, ns.

Sexuality: comparison between attachment styles to father

No significant relations were found for paternal attachment: 'Going out with someone', $F(2,185) = 2.35$, ns; 'Giving priority to love', $F(2,185) = 1.92$, ns; and 'Flirting with the aim of having sexual relations', $F(2,185) = 0.49$, ns. However, the ANOVA revealed a significant difference [$F(2,87) = 3.98$, $p < 0.05$] for 'Going out with someone' for girls only. Planned comparisons showed no significant difference between secure attachment and ambivalent attachment [$F(1,87) = 0.23$, ns], but a significant difference between secure attachment and avoidant attachment [$F(1,87) = 7.95$, $p < 0.01$] and between ambivalent attachment and avoidant attachment [$F(1,87) = 4.81$, $p < 0.05$], girls with avoidant attachment scoring higher on this dimension. No other significant relationship was found for either girls or boys.

Discussion

During adolescence, there is a dual trend of reorganising parental attachment and experimenting with romantic and sexual relationships. Many studies with adults (Brassard et al., 2007; Davis et al., 2004; Davis et al., 2006) have shown that parental attachment style influences future relationships, including sexual behaviour. This study investigated the relationship between style of attachment to each parent and sexual behaviour in early adolescence, the first such study on this period. The majority of adolescents described a secure attachment style to their parents, although a secure attachment to the mother was reported more by boys than by girls. The proportion of adolescents in our sample reporting insecure attachment (ambivalent and avoidant) is in line with Western data. In order to take a sufficiently broad view of sexuality in this period, we considered both behavioural and subjective aspects of the adolescents' sexual experiences. Adolescents have to develop their sexuality within emotionally close relationships, based on their cognitive

and affective maturity. We focused on two main areas of sexuality due to their association with sexual risks: early sexual involvement and the emotional investment in the sexual relationship. We found no difference between boys and girls in terms of involvement in sexuality. In contrast, girls take a more romantic view of sexuality than boys. Boys reported stronger intentions to have sex. The main finding is that adolescents with an insecure attachment style display specific characteristics with regard to their sexual involvement. Adolescents who report an insecure, ambivalent relationship with their mother tend to become more involved in sexual interactions, whereas those with an insecure avoidant relationship with their mother show little involvement in the emotional aspect of sexuality. Attachment to the father also plays a key role, but only for girls, for whom avoidant attachment promotes involvement in sexuality.

Based on the main studies with adults (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002), we postulated that adolescents with an ambivalent attachment style would engage earlier in sexual activities. Our results confirm this hypothesis; adolescents with ambivalent maternal attachment showed greater sexual engagement ('Going out with someone') than those with secure attachments. According to Tracy et al. (2003), insecure ambivalent attachment leads to earlier sexual experimentation and consequently to a higher probability of sexual risks. This sexual engagement could fill the emotional gaps of childhood. In a relationship, adolescents should, the greatest extent possible, first develop a base of secure mutual trust through loving interactions before engaging in sexual activity. There is a hyper-activating attachment strategy in which the sexual relationship is used to increase their sense of security. These adolescents with high separation anxiety seek close relationships. They are likely to engage rapidly and extensively in sexual activity, often to avoid loneliness (Tracy et al., 2003). In other words, it is possible that anxious adolescents tend to use sex to fill their needs for closeness and security and are likely to view sex as a barometer of the quality of the relationship.

Adolescents with avoidant attachment make less commitment to stable and long-term relationships (Birnbaum et al., 2006; Brassard et al., 2007; Davis et al., 2006). Their attachment system leads them to two types of strategy: sexual avoidance (abstinence) or engaging in relationships where sexuality is devoid of any emotional involvement (e.g. one-night stands) (Birnbaum et al., 2006; Davis et al., 2006; Tracy et al., 2003). We postulated that adolescents reporting avoidant parental attachment would engage in fewer or purely functional sexual interactions. This hypothesis is partially confirmed by our results and previous studies with adults in which the strategy of sexual engagement observed was devoid of affectivity. Adolescents with avoidant attachment to the mother gave significantly less importance to the loving dimension of sex. Their inherent difficulty with intimacy and emotional closeness tends to make these adolescents see only the instrumental dimension of sex. These results are consistent with those of Tracy et al. (2003) with adolescents and Hazan and Shaver (1987) with adults. While they do not necessarily avoid physical proximity, emotional closeness seems to be more problematic for these adolescents. According to Gonzaga, Turner, Keltner, Campos, and Altemus (2006), these adolescents present risky sexuality. Individuals with avoidant attachment try to minimise or deny their attachment needs; in order to maintain and restore their identity, they disable their attachment system, leading them to avoidance of emotional closeness. In terms of sexuality, this can result in dissociating sexuality from emotion. By not expressing love and affection during sex, these adolescents maintain a distance from their partner, intimacy being experienced as intrusive.

We also observed that the relationship between avoidant paternal attachment and 'Going out with someone' was only significant for girls; young girls with avoidant

attachment to their father engage earlier in sexual behaviour. Knowing that styles of attachment to the mother and father are closely correlated (Beinstein-Miller & Hoicowitz, 2004), it seems that these teenagers are potentially more 'at risk' of acting out their sexuality and divesting it of its emotional dimension. It is interesting to note that father–daughter attachment has related to the precocious sexual activity of adolescents. The quality of the father–daughter bond has an influence in the modelling/development of sexual involvement. An inconsistent father figure leads to more sexual acting out for girls, in search of a compensatory male figure. For girls, besides providing closeness and security, fathers play a particularly salient role in their style of relationships with men, including sexual.

In conclusion, in early adolescence, attachment style seems to play an important role in the acting out of sexuality, particularly attachment to the father for girls. Secure attachment seems to play a protective role, with later initiation of sexual activity. On the other hand, insecure ambivalent attachment promotes earlier sexual involvement. Avoidant attachment, especially to the mother, determines the importance of the sentimental aspect of sex ('Giving priority to love'), with sex seen essentially as a functional activity, isolated from affective needs. Thus, insecure attachment is specifically associated with sexual behaviour and emotions identified as being risky, with earlier sexual involvement and/or purely functional sexual behaviour (disinvestment of the affective sphere). Paternal attachment seems to have a significant effect on sexual decision-making and behaviour in adolescence, especially for girls. Further work should examine the respective roles of attachment to the mother and father in adolescent sexuality (girls and boys).

This study has a number of limitations. First, the use of self-evaluation measures may have led to a bias in reported behaviour. Due to the correlational nature of the data, it is not possible to determine causal relations. Furthermore, the sample has been relatively small, which reduces the number of participants within each gender who could be characterised as having insecure attachments. Although our findings support many of our hypotheses, attachment only explains part of the sexual experiences during early adolescence. Analysis distinguishing the type of sexuality (homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual) must also complete these results. Therefore, future research should further investigate these links between attachment and sexual experiences through other variables, both psychological (personality, sensation-seeking, impulsivity, emotional style) and sociocultural (beliefs, socialisation).

Declaration of interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Notes on contributors

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