Attachment and caregiving in adult close relationships: normative processes and individual differences

Nancy L. Collins & Brooke C. Feeney

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The past two decades have seen a rapid increase in the application of attachment theory to adult close relationships. Social, developmental, and clinical psychologists have made important advances in the measurement and conceptualization of individual differences in adult attachment orientations and in the normative functioning of attachment dynamics in adulthood (e.g., Feeney, 2008; Hesse, 2008; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Important advances have also been made concerning the inter-generational transmission of attachment patterns (see the 2009 Special Issue of this journal; Cowan & Cowan, 2009) and the continuity of attachment patterns from childhood to adulthood (e.g., Grossmann, Grossmann, & Waters, 2005; Simpson, Collins, & Salvatore 2011). Most of this work, however, has focused on the attachment (or care-seeking) system; much less attention has been paid to caregiving behavior and dynamics in adult close relationships. Just as parent–child relationships are conceptualized as attachment-caregiving bonds, there is growing recognition that a complete understanding of attachment relationships in adulthood requires that we gain a deeper understanding of the caregiving dynamics that unfold in those relationships. This Special Issue contributes to this effort by bringing together social and developmental perspectives on caregiving in adult close relationships.

Attachment theory provides a central perspective from which to examine caregiving processes in the context of close relationships because it stipulates that the need for security is one of the most fundamental of all basic needs (for individuals of all ages), and it provides a basis for understanding the complex interpersonal dynamics involved in three important and inter-related components of human nature: attachment, caregiving, and exploration (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, 1988). All three systems are presumed to have survival value; thus, the urge to engage in each form of behavior is likely to be preprogrammed to some degree. Indeed, Bowlby (1988) argued that “to leave their development solely to the caprices of individual learning would be the height of biological folly” (p. 5). Because attachment theory considers the inter-workings of these three systems, it points to interesting and important avenues for research that have previously gone unexplored. The three systems are briefly described below as a backdrop for this Special Issue.

**Attachment**

First, drawing on ethological principles, attachment theory regards the propensity to form strong emotional bonds with particular individuals (attachment) as an innate human
characteristic, present in infancy and continuing through adulthood and old age (Bowlby, 1973, 1982). Individuals are presumed to come into the world equipped with an attachment system that functions to maintain the individuals’ safety and security through contact with nurturing caregivers (i.e., attachment figures). The attachment system becomes activated most strongly in adversity so that when distressed (e.g., alarmed, anxious, frightened, tired, or ill), the individual will feel an urge to seek protection, comfort, and support from a primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1973, 1982; Bretherton, 1987; Gillath et al. 2006).

Although attachment theory was originally developed to explain the nature of the relationship that develops between a parent and child, Bowlby emphasized that attachment behavior is not limited to children. Although it is less readily activated in adults than in children, attachment behavior can be seen in adults whenever they are feeling distressed. One of the most public and intense examples of attachment behavior in adults could be seen during the time of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, when many individuals felt a strong desire to be in close proximity to their loved ones. However, attachment behavior in adults can be witnessed, perhaps with less intensity, in many other types of distressing situations. For example, adults often seek proximity to the significant people in their lives in response to stress resulting from physical pain, fatigue, fear of new situations, feelings of rejection by others, work problems, and threat of loss. Attachment behavior, and an associated increase in desire for care, is considered to be the norm in these situations (Bowlby, 1988).

An important postulate of attachment theory is that both adults and children tend to maintain relations to the significant people in their lives (attachment figures) within certain limits of distance or accessibility. Attachment behaviors can be regarded as a set of behavior patterns that have the effect of keeping the individual in close proximity to a nurturing caregiver, and the conditions that terminate activation of the attachment system depend on the intensity of its arousal. At low intensity, it may simply be the sight or sound of the caregiver; at higher intensity, clinging, prolonged embraces, and/or active problem solving may be necessary. Attachment theory emphasizes that adults’ desire for comfort and support in adversity should not be regarded as childish or immature dependence; instead, it should be respected as an intrinsic part of human nature that contributes to personal health and well-being. Moreover, research in both the child and adult attachment literatures support the postulate that the particular way in which attachment behavior comes to be organized within an individual (e.g., how it is manifested by a particular individual) depends to a large extent on the individual’s history of experiences with attachment figures/caregivers in distressing situations — and on the general knowledge the individual has gleaned from these experiences regarding the self (one’s worthiness, acceptability, and capabilities) and attachment figures/caregivers (their accessibility, availability, and likely responses as environmental conditions change).

**Exploration**

Attachment theory states that another basic component of human nature is the urge to explore the environment — to work, play, discover, pursue goals, and take part in activities with peers (Bowlby, 1988). However, true exploration is expected to occur only when attachment needs have been satisfied (when the attachment system is deactivated). In this sense, exploration can be antithetic to attachment behavior (Bowlby, 1988). That is, when an individual of any age is feeling safe and secure, he/she is able to explore away from the attachment figure (or caregiver) and pursue autonomous activities. However, when feeling distressed in any way, he/she will feel an urge toward proximity. According to the theory,
when individuals are confident that an attachment figure (e.g., a parent in childhood, a spouse in adulthood) is available and accessible when needed and will be responsive when called upon, then they should feel secure enough to explore the environment, take on challenges, engage in independent activities, and make discoveries. For adults, these exploratory activities may take many forms and may last for varying lengths of time; nonetheless, a secure home base is presumed to be crucial for optimal functioning and mental health. Examples of exploratory activities for adults include working, traveling, developing hobbies, visiting new places, working toward important personal goals, developing new friendships, and engaging in leisure activities (Carnelley & Ruscher, 2000; Hazan & Shaver, 1990). However, focused and productive exploratory activity is presumed to occur only when the individual (a) does not question the security and availability of his/her home base, and (b) is not experiencing fear, distress, or any condition that would lead him/her to feel an urge to move toward his/her home base.

**Caregiving/support-provision**

A third major component of human nature, according to attachment theory, is caregiving (Bowlby, 1982, 1988). Caregiving includes a broad array of behaviors that complement (and support) a relationship partner’s attachment and exploration behavior (Bowlby, 1982, 1988; Kunce & Shaver, 1994). Thus, caregiving is viewed as serving two major functions: (1) providing a safe haven for the attached person by meeting his/her needs for security (e.g., by providing emotional comfort and problem-solving in stressful situations), and (2) providing a secure base for the attached person by supporting his/her autonomy and exploration in the environment.

In his writings on attachment theory, Bowlby (1969, 1982, 1988) emphasized the need for additional research on caregiving processes and stated that caregiving should be studied systematically within a conceptual framework similar to that adopted for attachment behavior. However, theory regarding the development and functioning of the caregiving system was never developed in his writings in the same way that he detailed theory and evidence regarding the attachment system. George and Solomon (1989, 1999a, 1999b) have noted this as well and have launched a program of research in an effort to provide theoretical and empirical elaboration of maternal–infant caregiving dynamics (see also George & Solomon, 1996). A similar theoretical elaboration and intensive program of research regarding caregiving in adult relationships is needed, and the purpose of this Special Issue is to contribute in this regard.

This Special Issue on attachment and caregiving includes papers from six sets of authors (including both social and developmental psychologists) who have been working in this area. In this set of papers, a variety of research methods (e.g., experimental, observational, daily diary, neuroscience) and a variety of procedures for assessing attachment-relevant constructs are used to examine caregiving in adult intimate relationships, and in relationships between adult caregivers of elderly parents. The papers in this Special Issue reflect the broad definition of caregiving that is characteristic of the adult attachment literature, showing that attachment and caregiving dynamics occur not only when individuals are coping with stress or vulnerability, but also in contexts involving exploration, personal growth, and positive life events. In doing so, they address important questions such as: (a) what are the attachment-related factors that influence caregiving quality?; (b) can we identify individuals who are effective and ineffective caregivers?; (c) what are the personal and interpersonal mechanisms that lead people to be responsive or unresponsive
caregivers?; and (d) do specific caregiving behaviors predict important outcomes for the care recipient?

A variety of answers are provided to these questions by the authors of this Special Issue: Mikulincer, Shaver, Sahdra, and Bar-On (2013, pp. 246–260, this issue) show that mental depletion and dispositional attachment insecurities have adverse effects on social support provision in couples, but that these effects can be overcome by a security-enhancing manipulation (accomplished through subliminal priming). Feeney, Collins, Van Vleet, and Tomlinson (2013, pp. 261–280, this issue) identify underlying motivations for providing (and for not providing) support for exploration and personal growth (i.e., secure base support), and show theoretically consistent links between these motives and both caregiving behavior and dispositional attachment orientation in couples. Gosnell and Gable (2013, pp. 281–301, this issue) show that dispositional attachment orientations shape how romantic partners perceive and respond to capitalization support (support for positive life events) in daily interaction, and how these processes affect daily relationship and personal well-being. Coan, Kasle, Jackson, Schaefer, and Davidson (2013, pp. 302–314, this issue) find that mutuality in couples (a concept closely linked to attachment theory’s notion of responsiveness) predicts decreased neural threat reactivity in response to mild electric shocks, suggesting that the security-regulating impact of an intimate partner depends on the degree to which that partner is perceived to be responsive to one’s needs. Waters, Brockmeyer, and Crowell (2013, pp. 315–330, this issue) provide evidence that script-like attachment representations shape both attachment narratives and attachment-related caregiving and care-seeking behavior in couples’ conflict discussions, explaining the links between them. Finally, Chen, Waters, Hartman, Zimmerman, Miklowitz, and Waters (2013, pp. 331–347, this issue) contribute to a scarcity of attachment-related research on caregiving in older adulthood by examining links between adults’ attachment representations and the task of caring for elderly parents with dementia, and by showing that attachment representations influence the quality of care that adults provide their elderly parents.

As a whole, the papers that make up this Special Issue take into account (a) the interpersonal nature of caregiving processes, and (b) both normative processes and individual differences in attachment-caregiving dynamics in adult relationships. These papers highlight the diverse contexts in which caregiving takes place in adult close relationships, the factors that shape effective and ineffective caregiving, and the critical role that caregiving plays in personal and relational outcomes. Our goal in organizing this Special Issue was not only to showcase these exciting new discoveries, but also to encourage continued dialogue and collaboration between social and developmental psychologists working in this area. As illustrated by the papers included here, social and developmental perspectives on adult caregiving offer methodological innovations, measurement tools, and conceptual models that are unique but also highly complementary. We hope that this Special Issue will advance scientific research on caregiving in adulthood and offer a strong foundation for future collaborative work in this area.

References