Hazan and Shaver (1987)

Psychologists have traditionally been interested in the relationship between a child and their primary caregiver. They have argued that this relationship leads to an attachment style that has an effect on one's developing personality and this would have an effect on future relationships.

Despite the long history of this theory, research on the effect of infant-parent attachment on adult relationships is limited. The goal of Hazan and Shaver's (1987) study was to determine if there was a correlation between one's attachment style and their satisfaction in romantic relationships.

Background information

Hazan and Shaver (1987) argue that romantic love is an attachment process, experienced somewhat differently by different people because of variations in their attachment histories. Bowlby (1957) hypothesized that attachment styles developed in infancy play a role in later attachment styles through the **continuity hypothesis.** Through interacting with our primary caregiver, we develop an **internal working model** - a mental representation of one's worthiness and expectations of others' reactions to the self.

Ainsworth's Strange Situation Test lead to a classification of attachment styles.

> **Insecurely attached - avoidant** (20 percent of the children) The child shows apparent indifference when the mother leaves the room and avoids contact with her when she returns. The child is not afraid of strangers.

> **Securely attached** (70 percent of the children) The child is upset when the mother leaves and is happy to see her again. The child is easily comforted by the mother.

> **Insecurely attached - ambivalent** (10 percent of the children) The child is very upset when the mother leaves the room, and the mother has difficulty soothing the child when she returns. The child seeks comfort, but at the same time rejects it.

Hazan & Shaver (1987) assumed that adult attraction and relationship formation is a reflection of the expectations and beliefs that people have formed about themselves and their close relationships as a result of their experiences with early attachment figures. They expected that different types of respondents— secure, avoidant, and ambivalent— would experience their most important love relationships differently. A secure adult would be characterized by trust, friendship, and positive emotions. For avoidant adults, love was expected to be marked by fear of closeness and lack of trust. Ambivalent adults were expected to experience love as a preoccupying, almost painfully exciting, but struggle to form

an intimate relationship with another person.

Procedure and results

To carry out their study, the researchers devised a questionnaire called the "love quiz" that was published in a local newspaper. The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first contained 56 statements concerning the participant's most important relationship - for example, "I considered/consider X one of my best friends." The participants responded to a Likert scale by circling SD, D, A, or SA to indicate points along a *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* continuum. Part 2 of the questionnaire asked specific questions about the nature of the relationship. The final section of the questionnaire included questions about the participant's childhood relationships with his or her mother and father and the parent's relationship with each other.

The participants were asked to focus on one romantic relationship, past or present, that they thought was the most important in their life.

The sample was self-selected. 620 people aged between 14 to 82 years responded to the love quiz, with a median age of 34 and a mean of 36. There were 205 males and 415 females. Ninety-one percent were "primarily heterosexual," 4% were "primarily homosexual," and 2% were "primarily bisexual. Forty-two percent were married at the time of the survey.

The researchers found that 56% of the respondents demonstrated what would be considered a secure attachment style, 25 % showed an avoidant style and 19% showed an ambivalent style. The best predictor of adult attachment type was the participants' perceptions of the quality of their relationship with each parent and the parent's relationship with each other. People who were securely attached said their parents had been readily available, attentive, and responsive. Avoidant people said their parents were unresponsive, rejecting, and inattentive. Ambivalent people said their parents were anxious, only sometimes responsive, and generally out of step with their needs.

Secure lovers described their most important love experience as especially happy, friendly, and trusting. They emphasized being able to accept and support their partner despite the partner's faults. Moreover, their relationships tended to endure longer: 10.02 years, on average, compared with 4.86 years for the ambivalent participants and 5.97 years for the avoidant participants.

The avoidant lovers were characterized by fear of intimacy, emotional highs and lows, and jealousy, the ambivalent participants experienced love as involving obsession, desire for reciprocation and union, emotional highs and lows, and extreme sexual attraction and jealousy.

Secure participants said that romantic feelings wax and wane but at times reach the intensity experienced at the start of the relationship and that in some relationships romantic love never fades. The avoidant participants said the kind of head-over-heels romantic love depicted in novels and movies does not exist in real life; romantic love seldom lasts

Ambivalent participants claimed that it is easy to fall in love and that they frequently feel themselves beginning to fall, although (like the avoidant participants) they rarely find what they would call real love. Like the secure participants, the ambivalent participants said they believe that romantic feelings wax and wane over the course of a relationship.

Follow-up study

Because of the very large age range of the first study, the researchers wanted to see if age played a role in the impact of one's childhood attachment styles on romantic adult relationships. To do this, a second study was carried out with a sample of 108 (38 men and 70 women) university students. The average age was 18. The questionnaire was done as an in-class assignment.

The research found a similar breakdown in the attachment styles in the student population (56%, 23%, 20%). The correlations obtained in the first study were statistically significant but not strong. The correlations were stronger in Study 2 where the average participant was 18 years of age. When the researchers divided the newspaper sample into younger and older age groups, correlations with parent variables were higher for the younger group. It seems likely that continuity between childhood and adult experiences decreases as one gets further into adulthood.

Conclusion

Although the researchers found there was some correlation between childhood attachment style and the quality of one's adult romantic relationships, they warned about drawing too many conclusions about the continuity between early childhood experience and adult relationships. It would be overly deterministic to say that insecurely attached children would also end up in insecure adult relationship patterns.

Evaluation

The study was based on a **self-selected sample**. The sample had more female than male participants - and the level of education was higher than the population average. Self-selected samples also tend to be more motivated to take part in the task. This may mean that there was some variable that was common to the participants that could have influenced the findings. This is why the follow-up study, which used an opportunity sample, was important to establish the credibility of the findings.

Questionnaires are reliant on **self-reported data**. As the questionnaires were anonymous, this served as a control for the social desirability effect. However, it is difficult for people to articulate exactly how they feel in love relationships. In addition, the peak-end rule may play a role in distorting memory. Participants are unlikely to have a perfect memory of their love experiences or the nature of their relationships with their parents, especially in their preschool years. It would be useful to assess both partners in a relationship to triangulate data and get beyond self-report.

The participants were asked to answer questions about only one romantic relationship; this does not determine a pattern in relationships.

The use of a Likert scale could compromise **construct validity**. Participants may have different interpretations of the questions and/or the scale itself. In addition, there are gender and cultural differences in the willingness to choose "strong" responses (strongly agree/strongly disagree). It is often the case that respondents gravitate to the mean, choosing the neutral response.

The study is **correlational** and cannot determine a cause-and-effect relationship. There is no control for the several variables that may affect a relationship. Relationships are complex and it is difficult to establish causality for their success or failure.