

The dynamics of measuring attachment

KIM BARTHOLOMEW and MARLENE MORETTI

Shaver and Mikulincer's review makes a strong case that self-reports of adult attachment are associated with attachment-related processes that are unconscious or at least that occur automatically and outside of awareness. Therefore, the common criticism that self-reports cannot meaningfully assess attachment orientations in a manner that is reflective of dynamic processes is clearly false. The belief that interview measures are the only valid way to assess adult attachment is based in fundamental assumptions about what can and cannot be assessed in self-reports, and what needs to be assessed in determining adult attachment orientation. The AAI approach to assessing adult attachment is based on the assumption that assessment of defensive strategies, which operate at least partially outside of conscious awareness, is a necessary component in the evaluation of 'states of mind' with respect to attachment. Moreover, it is assumed that these strategies can be accurately scored (given appropriate training of coders) from the transcripts of interviews in which participants discuss the relationships they had with their parents in childhood. The attachment strategies identified in the AAI are assumed to reflect processes that operate outside the interview setting, especially in attachment-relevant contexts such as parenting. By definition, individuals with particular attachment strategies deny some types of psychological experiences and/or distort their responses to questions tapping these experiences. AAI advocates would therefore tend to conclude that it makes little sense to ask individuals with insecure attachment patterns direct questions about processes that are assumed to be defensively distorted and not open to conscious access. In contrast, they would argue that interview procedures are the most appropriate way to assess adult attachment because defensive strategies can be assessed and provide important clues to underlying attachment issues. Thus, it is common in the attachment literature to see comments such as: 'Because we are interested in differences in processing attachment-related thoughts and feelings, we deal only with findings linking attachment states of mind [as assessed by the AAI] with psychopathology' (Dozier, Stovall, & Albus, 1999, p. 498).

How can self-reports be useful if this is true? One possibility is that self-reports about attachment are valid assessments of dynamic processes. This seems unlikely since these reports are not designed to assess such processes. Another possibility, suggested by Hesse (1999), is that states of mind with respect to early attachment experiences are not necessarily available to conscious awareness (therefore requiring interview measures to assess), but attachment orientations in the romantic domain are (therefore allowing for self-report assessments). However, we cannot think of any good reasons why the process of recalling and reporting on childhood experiences would be qualitatively different from the process of recalling and reporting on

Correspondence to: Kim Bartholomew, Department of Psychology, 8888 University Drive, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6, Canada. Fax: (604) 291-3427. Email: bartholo@sfu.ca

experiences in romantic relationships. In addition, our own experiences of interviewing both in the family and in the romantic domains suggest that levels of incoherence and defensive distortion that are present when participants discuss past and current intimate partners rival levels shown in the childhood domain. A more realistic interpretation of the demonstrated usefulness of self-reports is that it is not necessary to assess these dynamic processes to achieve an accurate assessment of a general attachment orientation. The success of self-reports may be due to the fact that questions are diagnostic about attachment style, but do not assess defensive strategies and thereby bypass eliciting defensive reactions. As described by Shaver and Mikulincer, self-reports assess behaviors and feelings in close relationships that are 'convenient surface indicators' of underlying attachment dynamics. For example, we would not expect individuals with a dismissing or deactivating attachment strategy to be able to report accurately on this defensive process. By definition, such individuals defensively downplay the importance of attachment relationships, idealize attachment figures, defensively exclude attachment-related information from awareness, and so on. But such individuals can accurately report on their feelings about close relationships (e.g. 'It is very important for me to feel independent and self-sufficient'). In fact, contrary to what we might have predicted, self-reports of a dismissing orientation are correlated just as strongly with interview assessments as are self-reports of other attachment orientations (e.g. Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998). Most important, as described in the target article, Shaver and colleagues (Shaver, Belsky, & Brennan, 2000) have found that the 'coherence of mind' coding scale of the AAI is robustly related to the avoidance and anxiety scales of self-report measures.

We have worked with both self-report and interview measures of attachment. The interview measures we have used (the Peer Attachment Interview and the History of Attachments Interview) are quite different from the AAI: notably, our approach to coding individual differences in attachment strategies falls within the two-dimensional framework common to most current self-report measures of attachment. However, these interview approaches share with the AAI a focus on defensive processes revealed in the interview. And we have tended to share the bias of some AAI researchers that interview assessments are preferable to self-report assessments. Why else would we spend endless hours in training coders and interviewers, and in conducting and coding interviews? How can we justify this bias? With some difficulty, as it turns out. Various studies have indicated that, especially at the level of attachment dimensions, self-report and interview assessments are moderately related and are equally strong indicators of latent attachment dimensions (e.g. Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). And we are not aware of any compelling evidence that interview-based assessments do a better job of predicting the sorts of interpersonal and intrapersonal outcomes that interest us. Why, then, do we persist in using interviews? Other than a simple need to justify our previous reliance on attachment interviews (We've done all this work. Therefore, it *must* be worthwhile), our faith in interview assessments is grounded in our personal experiences of assessing individuals whose perceptions of themselves and their close relationships appear to be so distorted that we could not imagine that they would be capable of meaningful self-reports. Clinical interviews can be powerful; the AAI and similar interviews are provocative and can elicit compelling disclosure and demonstrations of pathological processes. We know that clinicians are often heavily influenced by such material (often more heavily than they should be) in diagnostic decision-making (Gonzah, 2000). Thus, it is not surprising that we feel so strongly about the value of interview methods.

We have considered the possibility that part of the success of self-reports in predicting outcomes is a function of sample selection. Perhaps self-reports do a reasonable job of assessing attachment style in normative populations (and especially college samples) in which most participants are not characterized by the depth of insecurity that one typically finds in clinical samples. Perhaps the deeper the insecurity, the more distorted the quality of self-reports, even self-reports of basic feelings and behaviors in close relationships. Although this notion has some intuitive appeal to us, we can find no supportive evidence. In comparing convergence between self-report and interview assessments of anxiety and avoidance in college samples (e.g. Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) and clinical samples (e.g. Moretti, 2000) we see no systematic pattern of findings. Across the range of samples we have dealt with, there is generally a moderate association across measures assessing parallel attachment dimensions or strategies. We have even looked to some large community samples to see if these associations are weaker when we consider subsamples of participants relatively low in security (based on interview ratings). Again we find no consistent pattern. Clearly more systematic research is required to investigate whether the predictive validity of different methods of assessing attachment differs by samples. More generally, as pointed out in the target article, work is needed in looking at attachment dynamics in clinical samples. It is possible that convergence between self-reports and interviews differs across various types of clinical populations, and it would be interesting to examine the defensive characteristics of individuals for whom these measures are discordant. But, at least for now, we cannot marshal a convincing argument that self-reports are useful only in non-clinical samples.

Not only are we hard pressed to justify our preference for interview over self-report assessments of adult attachment, but the assumption that interview assessments tap basic attachment dynamics is open to question. The AAI has been very useful in predicting parenting behavior and child attachment status (van IJzendoorn, 1995) and other attachment interviews focusing on adult relationships have been predictive of adult interpersonal processes (e.g. Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Crowell & Waters, 1997). But with the exception of some suggestive work by Dozier and Kobak (1992) looking at physiological responses in the AAI, there is little evidence to support the assumption that the AAI (and other interview measures) is getting at unconscious dynamic processes. Although Shaver and Mikulincer kindly state that the AAI is a 'fairly direct window onto attachment-related unconscious processes', research has not confirmed this to be the case. Just because the AAI is a clinical interview it is not inherently a window into dynamic processes. Such assumptions require empirical validation. Shaver and Mikulincer recognize this later in the target paper when they state that AAI researchers have 'not systematically determined whether [the] rich narrative material is linked to cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions to the kinds of threatening situations that should activate the attachment system'. This should be a top priority for AAI researchers.

In reflecting on Shaver and Mikulincer's provocative paper, we are left in a dilemma. We still feel very attached to interview assessments of attachment and we are hesitant to abandon them in favor of self-reports. On the other hand, we have been convinced that self-reports are predictive of attachment-related dynamic processes and we are unable to argue for the greater (or even equal) utility of interviews in reflecting these processes. We agree that studies are needed that compare methods of measurement and their predictability to various outcomes. In the meantime, the rich clinical material revealed in attachment interviews is valuable for clarifying attachment-related

concepts and processes, and for generating new ideas and hypotheses. As well, we have found that experience with attachment interviews is very helpful in the training process, for students conducting attachment-related research and for clinical students seeking to apply attachment concepts in their clinical practice. Most importantly, interviews provide a way of understanding the psychological meaning of attachment within the unique context of an individual's life. Perhaps the joint use of self-reports and interviews would provide the window into attachment dynamics with the best view, particularly as we embark on integrating classic psychodynamic concepts into mainstream empirical research. We agree with Shaver and Mikulincer that there is a wealth of psychodynamic concepts (such as concepts from Kohut's self-psychology, but also from Sullivan and Horney) that are likely linked to attachment patterns in important and illuminating ways. And like Shaver and Mikulincer we look forward to the day when open dialogue between those who rely on clinical strategies to understand psychodynamic concepts and others who employ empirically based methodologies will allow for the development of a comprehensive and empirically grounded theory of personality development and functioning.

REFERENCES

- Bartholomew, K., & Horowitz, L. M. (1991). Attachment styles among young adults: A test of a model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *61*, 226–244.
- Bartholomew, K., & Shaver, P. (1998). Methods of assessing adult attachment: Do they converge? In J. A. Simpson & W. S. Rholes (Eds), *Attachment theory and close relationships* (pp. 25–45). New York: Guilford.
- Crowell, J. A., & Waters, E. (1997, April). *The secure base phenomenon in adult attachment relationships: Exploration of the core of the attachment system*. Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Washington, DC.
- Dozier, M., & Kobak, R. R. (1992). Psychophysiology in attachment interviews: Converging evidence for deactivating strategies. *Child Development*, *63*, 1473–1480.
- Dozier, M., Stovall, K. C., & Albus, K. E. (1999). Attachment and psychopathology in adulthood. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 497–519). New York: Guilford.
- Ganzach, Y. (2000). The weighing of pathological and non-pathological information in clinical judgment. *Acta Psychologica*, *104*, 87–101.
- Griffin, D. W., & Bartholomew, K. (1994). Models of the self and other: Fundamental dimensions underlying measures of adult attachment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *67*, 430–445.
- Hesse, E. (1999). The Adult Attachment Interview: Historical and current perspectives. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 395–433). New York: Guilford.
- Moretti, M. M. (2000). *Attachment and adjustment in adolescence*. Paper presented to the American Family Therapy Academy, Fifth Clinical Research Conference. Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario.
- Shaver, P. R., Belsky, J., & Brennan, K. A. (2000). The Adult Attachment Interview and self-reports of romantic attachment: Associations across domains and methods. *Personal Relationships*, *7*, 25–43.
- Van IJzendoorn, M. H. (1995). Adult attachment representations, parental responsiveness, and infant attachment: A meta-analysis on the predictive validity of the Adult Attachment Interview. *Psychological Bulletin*, *117*, 387–403.

Copyright of Attachment & Human Development is the property of Routledge, Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.