

## Roots and Wings: The Role of Attachment Theory in Adjustment to College

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Many stressful changes occur in young people's lives when they make the transition from high school to college. Although many individuals cope with these changes with relative ease, others may become overwhelmed and experience significant adjustment problems. These adjustment problems may manifest themselves in academic difficulties and social problems. Significant numbers of first year students also struggle with varying degrees of loneliness (Cutrona, 1982), health problems, and emotional problems in the first weeks and months of college (Fisher & Hood, 1987). Given an unpleasant first experience at college, many of these struggling students will probably contribute to the school's attrition statistics. Devising a means of predicting which of the incoming students may struggle with the transition to college has been a goal of college student affairs administrators as they attempt to increase the retention rates. In recent years adult attachment theory has suggested that attachment status may be one such indicator of those incoming students who may be particularly at-risk for adjustment problems. The current study presents an empirical test of that theoretical prediction.

### Attachment theory

Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory has become an important framework for understanding intrapsychic and interpersonal processes from infancy to late adolescence, and even into adulthood. Using an ethological approach, Bowlby hypothesized an innate mechanism whereby certain caregiver/infant behaviors would, in most cases, create both a secure emotional base for the child and a cognitive "working model" for participation in future relationships. This secure emotional base becomes the foundation for venturing out into the world. The nature of the child's cognitive model for relationships becomes the template for future self and other relationships. The lasting effects of these early relationships are the cognitive and emotional "filters" through which relationships with others are experienced. If the child does not develop the capacity to form secure and supportive relationships, the theory would suggest that serious consequences may result in the child's later life. Although attachment figures may change throughout a life, the individual's past experiences with significant others creates a distinct attachment style which may make finding support in new relationships more difficult depending on the internal filters each person brings with them to new situations.

Early empirical work with young children revealed three types of attachment styles

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which had important consequences for the child's behavior. Based on observations of the child's responses to stressful situations, children were identified as Secure, Anxious-Avoidant, or Anxious-Ambivalent. The Secure style is associated with caregiving which is responsive to the child's behaviors and needs. As a result, the child learns that needed caregiving can be elicited from others and that others can be trusted to be attentive and responsive. The Secure child experiences an emotional "confidence" in relationships with others that the other two styles do not. The Avoidant child and the Ambivalent child are both described as "anxious" in that their behavior reveals an emotional vulnerability to stressful situations. Many factors may be at work, but the cumulative impact of caregivers' relative lack of responsiveness is to create in the child a distrust of others and feelings of vulnerability and fearfulness in times of need. They lack the secure emotional base from which to face the challenges of life. In the case of the Avoidant child, it appears that the child has decided to keep a distance from others and to be as independent as possible. The Ambivalent child, on the other hand, wants close and secure relationships with others, but fears that others are undependable and, therefore, fears the risk that comes with being dependent on them.

The seminal work with infants has spurred a large body of research with older children which has demonstrated lasting effects of early experiences and predictable differences in behavior due to attachment style differences. The significant others in the child's life may change as the child gets older, but the nature of these relationships still results in emotional and cognitive assessments of self and others. For example, in adult relationships peers are shown to take the place of parents in the attachment model (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Adults who are characterized by a secure attachment style have a comfort with closeness, a positive view of themselves, and a relatively more positive view of the world and the people around them than do individuals who have an "anxious" attachment style.

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) expanded the initial attachment style model and have based their measure of adult attachment on four patterns or styles of attachment. In attempting to better understand the reasons why an individual may be avoidant, they designed a four-cell model of attachment based on the relationship between the two constructs "model of self" and "model of others." "Secure" individuals have a positive view of self and others. They perceive themselves as relatively independent and competent to deal with life's challenges. Others are seen as potential friends and as sources of support when needed. The "Preoccupied" individuals have a negative sense of self as needy and dependent on others. Others, however, are seen in positive ways and are sought after for close relationships. Those with a negative view of others but a positive view of self are the "Dismissing" attachment style. They are suspicious of others and avoid close relationships, but are comfortable with their own independence. The "Fearful" individuals are insecure about their own capacities and also see others as threatening.

The four category model would predict that the Fearful freshmen would have the most difficulty adjusting to college as they leave familiar settings and encounter many new strangers. They would be apprehensive about their abilities to meet the multiple

demands of academic and social environments. They may perceive other students as threatening and view even well-intentioned student affairs personnel as intrusive. As a result, they may be more likely to leave.

## Attachment and Adjustment to College

Given the importance of the transition to college, a great deal of research attention has been directed at the factors that affect successful adjustment. In 2000, *The Journal of Adolescent Research* published an entire special issue devoted to “Transitions from Adolescence” which addressed such variables as parental influence, normative pressures and academic environment, past experiences, expectations, and identity status and processing style (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000; Wintre & Ben-Knaz, 2000; Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000; Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000). The impact of attachment style on this phase of life has also been addressed in recent research, for example, by Burge, Hammen, Davila, and Daley (1997) who found that students who had more secure attachments developed less chronic strain in college two years later and fewer and less stressful events related to school.

Attachment theory predicts that because of entrenched negative views of self and others, certain individuals will have trouble forming new relationships. Problems forming new relationships may affect various aspects of a person’s life, including adjustment to college. As much of college adjustment involves new interpersonal relationships with peers, roommates, and faculty members, difficulties forming new relationships may lead to obstacles in the college experience. In these first few months of the college experience, students may also become distant from the relationships that they had already established at home to make them feel secure. This challenge of moving to college and forming new relationships necessitates adjustment, and it is during this transition time that students are particularly vulnerable to develop symptoms of poor adjustment.

In this study the relationship between attachment style and college adjustment was examined, using measures of various aspects of adjustment, including social self-esteem, acceptance of others, depression and health-related symptoms, loneliness, and a standardized measurement of college adjustment. Hypothesized was that the securely attached students would show higher self-esteem, higher acceptance of others, and lower depressive symptoms, resulting in better adjustment to college as indicated by the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ). Those individuals found to be preoccupied in attachment style were predicted to have lower self-esteem, higher acceptance of others, and more depressive symptoms, resulting in a difficult adjustment to college. Participants with dismissing attachment styles would have high self-esteem, low acceptance of others, and would vary in depressive symptoms. These individuals’ adjustment to college scores would be distributed similarly to those categorized as preoccupied. Fearful individuals would have relatively low self-esteem, low acceptance of others, and a high number of depressive symptoms, also resulting in a poorer adjustment to college score. Hypothesized was that those participants found to be fearful

would have the most difficulties in adjustment to college, and ultimately, would be more likely to leave college.

With the assumption that some new students will have a relatively greater need for support as they transition to college, many colleges provide a variety of support services. This study is an attempt to increase the efficiency of those support services by empirically demonstrating a model which may help identify those students who may be most in need and least likely to seek out such services.

## Methods

### Design and Participants

Within two weeks of their arrival at Eckerd College, nearly all of the incoming freshmen completed the Social Perception Inventory and the Relationship Questionnaire to identify their attachment styles. This initial phase of the study was conducted in August of the students' first year during Autumn Term – a specially designed transition course exclusively for first year students prior to the start of the Fall semester. The 284 freshmen included 129 males and 155 females. The results of the initial inventory revealed the attachment styles were 49% Secure, 22% Dismissing, 21% Fearful, and 8% Preoccupied.

Since this was a test of the theoretical prediction, it was necessary to derive a subject pool where all four categories were equally represented. The attachment measure yields both categorical and continuous scores of attachment. Based on the continuous scores, the 20 to 25 students with the highest scores in each of the attachment styles received personal invitations and follow up phone calls to participate. Equal numbers of males and females were selected.

In October, these freshmen (N = 84) completed the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ), the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI), the UCLA Loneliness Scale, several subscales from the Symptom Checklist 90-Revised (SCL-90R), and the Revised Social Perception Inventory.

To test the differential attrition risk prediction, college records were checked to determine how many of the 20 students with the most extreme scores in each attachment style had enrolled in each subsequent Fall semester.

## Instruments

### Social Perception Inventory

The Social Perception Inventory was created for this study in order to assess each student's perceptions of relationships with friends in high school, perceived parental support and predictions of their ability to transition from high school to college.

## The Relationship Questionnaire

The Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) is designed to measure attachment style. Bartholomew and Horowitz's scale consisted of four brief paragraphs, each relating to the different attachment styles of Secure, Dismissing, Preoccupied, and Fearful. Students were asked to rate themselves on each of the four paragraphs using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ("Not at all like me") to 7 ("Very much like me"). They then selected the one paragraph that best described themselves.

## The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ)

The SACQ (Baker & Siryk, 1984; 1989) is a 67-item scale divided into four subscales: academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal/emotional adjustment, and goal commitment/institutional attachment. The scale incorporated items such as "I feel that I fit in well as a part of the college environment" and "I really haven't had much motivation for studying lately." Students responded to the questions on a nine point scale that ranges from 1 ("Does Not Apply to Me") to 9 ("Applies Very Closely to Me"). High scores indicate better college adjustment.

## UCLA Loneliness Scale

The UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau & Cutrona, 1980) is a 20-item scale seeking to measure the psychological experience of loneliness. The scale incorporates items such as "I lack companionship" and "I feel left out." Students respond to the questions on a four-point scale that ranges from 1 ("Never") to 4 ("Often").

## Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI)

The Texas Social Behavior Inventory (Helmreich & Stapp, 1974) is a 15-item scale that measures social self-esteem. The scale incorporated items such as "Other people look up to me" and "I am a good mixer." Students responded to the questions on a four point scale that ranged from 1 ("Not at all characteristic of me") to 4 ("Very much characteristic of me").

## The Symptom Checklist 90-R (SCL-90-R)

The SCL-90-R (Derogatis & Cleary, 1977) quantifies problematic symptoms in terms of nine primary symptom subscales: somatization, obsessive-compulsive, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobia-anxiety, paranoid ideation and psychoticism. The four scales used in this study were: somatization, depression, anxiety, and hostility. The somatization subscale included items such as "crying easily" and "feeling lonely." The anxiety subscale included items such as "nervousness or shakiness inside" and "feeling so restless you couldn't sit still." The hostility subscale

included items such as “having urges to beat, injure or harm someone” and getting into frequent arguments.” Students rated how often they feel the way described on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (“Not at all”) to 5 (“Extremely often”).

### Revised Social Perception Inventory

Students responded to the same questions asked during the initial phase of the study. The questions were rephrased from high school experience to current college experience as the students were now fully immersed into their first academic year. In addition, a list of free response questions was added to the end of the Inventory to provide students with an opportunity to give their perceptions of their first year of college experience.

## Results and Discussion

The current study contrasted four, theoretically different types of incoming students. Students’ attachment styles were identified with a brief screening instrument shortly after their arrival on campus during their first year. Their scores on various adjustment indicators, assessed in the middle of the fall semester, were analyzed using a series of planned comparisons to determine whether the groups differed significantly in their adjustment to college.

### Social Relationships and Social Support Perceptions

By mid-semester, the predicted significant difference between the Secure and Fearful groups with the Fearful reporting fewer friendships at college was observed. Compared to the Secure students, both the Fearful and the Preoccupied students had significantly lower self-esteem in social situations as measured by the TSBI. The Fearful students differed significantly from both the Secure and Dismissing students in their expectation that they would make fewer friends in the future. The Fearful students scored significantly higher than the Secure and the Preoccupied students on the UCLA Loneliness scale. Both the Dismissing and Fearful groups held negative views of others, but the Dismissing students rated their friends as significantly more supportive than did the Fearful students. There was a significant difference between the Secure and Dismissing groups for the number of friends ( $p = .063$ ), with Secure making slightly more friends.

### Adjustment and Health

The Fearful students had significantly higher scores on the Symptom Checklist than did the Secure and Dismissing students, indicating a greater number of physical and stress-related symptoms. The Fearful students also had significantly more visits to the Health Center than did the Secure and Dismissing students, even though it was only the second month of the semester. On the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire, the

Fearful students were significantly lower than the Dismissing students on the Physical/Emotional Adjustment subscale. The Fearful students were significantly more likely to have been to the Campus Counseling Center than students in the other three groups (which did not differ from each other). The measures used in this study are self-report instruments, which implied that the Fearful students knew that they were struggling with the transition to college.

#### Attrition/Retention from Freshman to Senior Year

On the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire, the Fearful students were significantly lower than the Dismissing students on the Academic Adjustment subscale, perhaps serving as an early prediction that they would not complete their college degree. In order to assess whether or not there was a difference in retention over their sophomore to senior years, the 20 students with the most extreme scores in each of the four attachment styles (i.e., the most clear-cut examples of each style), were identified from the original sample of 284 incoming first year students. Table 1 presents the retention percentages for the four groups for each of the subsequent Fall semesters until their senior year. The Fearful first year students, identified before they even started their first semester of college, were most likely to leave the college prematurely.

#### Conclusions

The Fearful students seemed to struggle the most with their early adjustment to college. Close examination of the mean scores for the other three groups revealed that the Secure students usually adjusted the best, just as the Attachment theory would predict. They have little need for additional support services and probably become quickly integrated into the life of the college community, thus feeling comfortable seeking out such services if needed. Similarly, the Dismissing students showed a very strong adjustment on the various measures. They have developed a resourcefulness and self-sufficiency which results in a relatively lower need for social support. Across the several adjustment indicators used in the study, the Preoccupied students typically had mean adjustment scores that fell between those of the top two groups and those of the Fearful group and, as a result, they were not statistically different from the others. Attachment theory and research would predict that the Preoccupied students are probably quick to utilize the array of support services available at a small college. They may be more likely to use their faculty and resident hall advisors to help them with the transition because of their positive view of others and their immense need for close relationships and social support systems.

The intent of the current study was to determine if there was empirical support for the theoretical prediction that certain attachment groups would be at risk for poor adjustment to college. Having found that an identifiable group of incoming freshmen is at significant risk for poor adjustment, academic, psychological, and health problems, and even relatively greater attrition risk, the need for appropriate intervention with these

students is obvious. Results suggest that student support service personnel should become familiar with the attachment style literature and train Resident Advisors and other Student Affairs staff to recognize those students who demonstrate “Fearful” attachment style characteristics. Because of their negative view of self and others, these students are likely to experience college life as challenging in ways that exceed the normal academic and social adjustments. While it is likely that most colleges and universities already provide support services for students who experience difficulties, the Fearful students may actually avoid these services because of their distrust of others. This study provides a tool to those who attempt to serve students by calling attention to the incoming first year students who are most likely to need support. Negative statements about self and wariness of others should trigger a greater level of care. Since these students are not as likely to become engaged in campus life and activities, it would certainly be helpful if an upper-class student could actively “shepherd” these students to campus events. These results should also serve as a reminder to college personnel that those overzealous students who spend significant amounts of time in their office may not be the ones who are at-risk of attrition. A small college can do a great deal to detect and care for these students, and it is hoped that this study will encourage those who work with students in transition to seek them out.

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TABLE 1

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Percentage of Students Who Re-enrolled Each Academic Year by Attachment Style<sup>1</sup>.

	<b>Fall 2000</b> Sophomore Year	<b>Fall 2001</b> Junior Year	<b>Fall 2002</b> Senior Year <sup>1</sup>
<b>Secure</b>	85%	80%	80%
<b>Preoccupied</b>	75%	75%	68%
<b>Dismissing</b>	90%	80%	74%
<b>Fearful</b>	60%	50%	50%

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<sup>1</sup> Students who completed requirements for graduation early were omitted from the cohort study for senior year and analyses were performed with the reduced total number

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