



centre for applied
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THE UNIVERSITY
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Cross-College Childhood and Youth Research Seminar Series



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Assessing Attachment in Children and Young People

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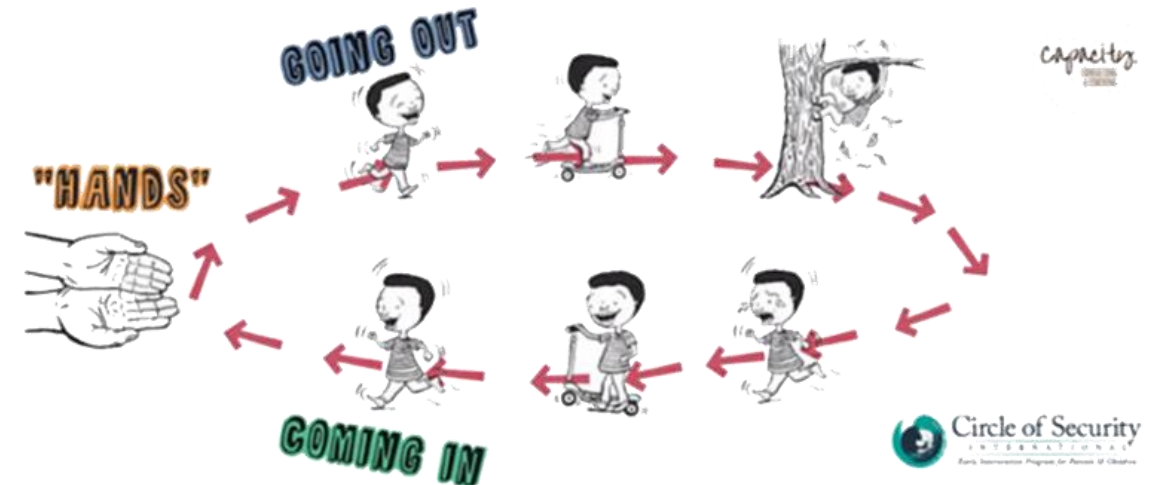
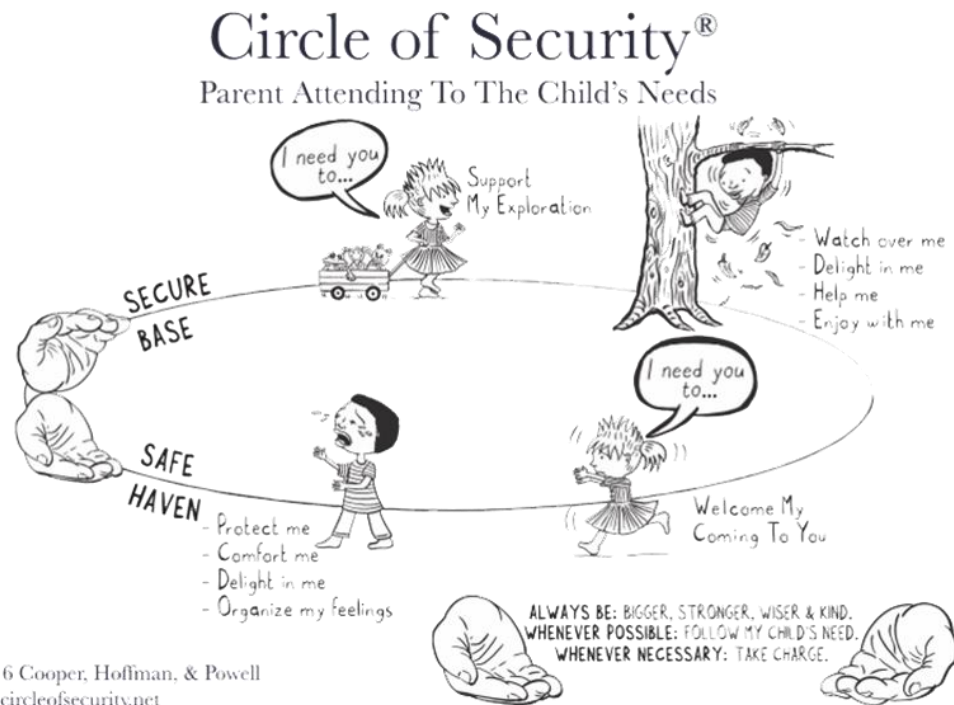
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"We are storytelling creatures, and as children we acquire language to tell those stories that we have inside us."

Jerome Bruner

We are all born in early interactions



Why attachment matters?

- Emotion regulation
- Trust
- Identity development
- Learning
- Socialisation

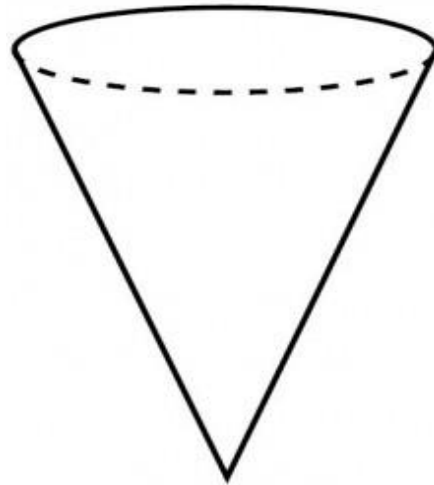
Mental representations of attachment: the Secure Base Script Knowledge



Early generalized
sensorimotor experiences

Contributing factors:
Age
Experience
Socialization process
Culture
Language

More Complexity
More Elaboration



Episodic Memory

When I cry, my mother usually comforts me.

What usually happens
“core representation”
(generalized)

Context- If I cry as I have scratched my knee my mum comforts me **but** if I cry as I am starting a temper tantrum she doesn't.

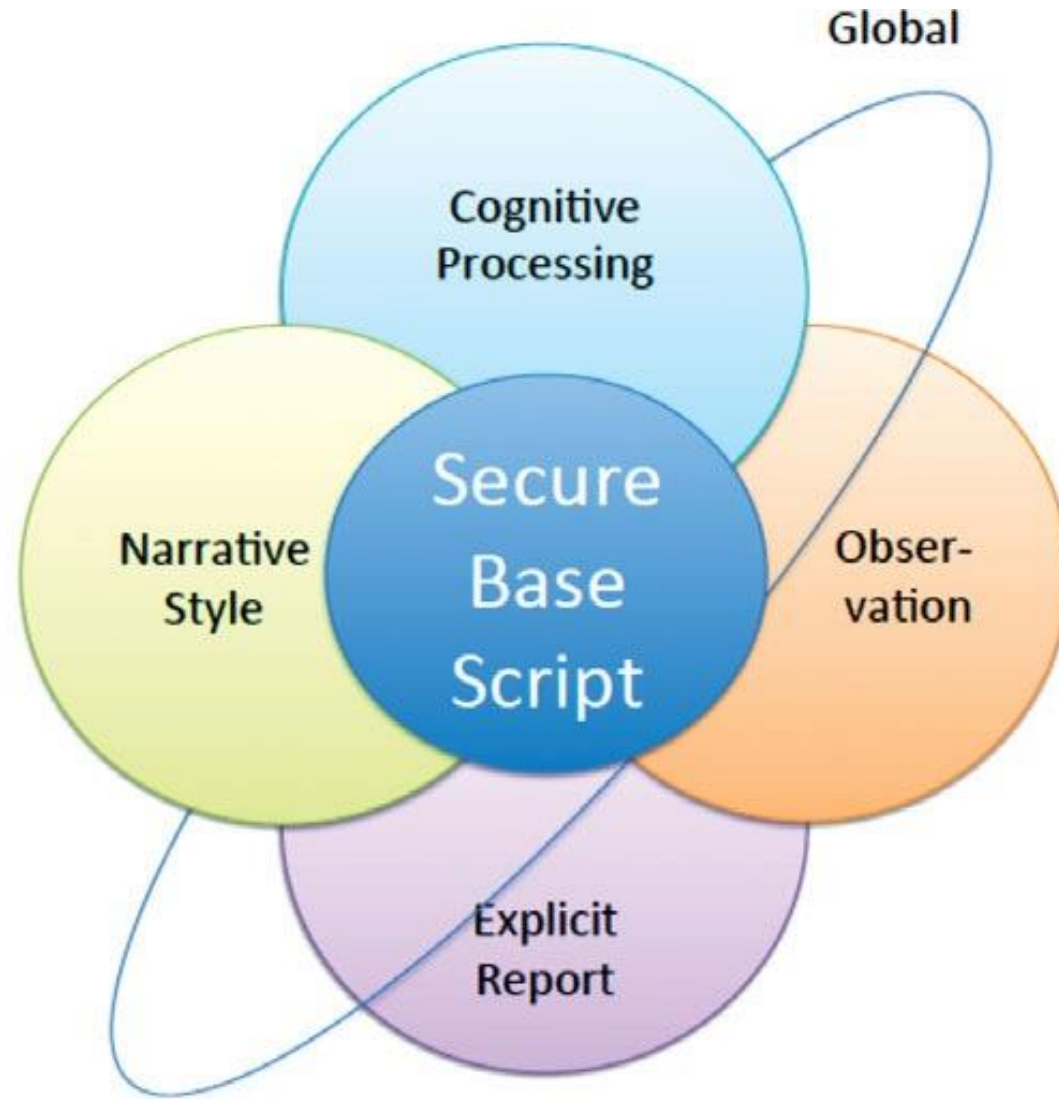
Attachment figures- If I cry as I have scratched my knee my mum comforts me **but** my father doesn't.



The “building blocks” of attachment representations: the Internal Working Models (IWMs)



- They reflect the caregiver’s response to the child’s needs and the child’s attachment behaviors.
- They are non-conscious, habitual, and incorporates “procedural knowledge”.
- They are based on ***snapshots of specific events*** whose affects is averaged.
- Once they are established, they largely operate on an ***unconscious basis*** and guide the perception of the world and future events. These are incorporated in previous knowledge.
- IWMs allow stability and coherence of a person’s experience over time but they may also be ***subject to potential distortion*** if conditions change (e. g. critical life events).



Some considerations on the assessment of attachment

- There is no “gold standard” with which to compare assessment measures beyond infancy.
- Need to define the behaviors related to the attachment system in ***middle childhood*** and ***early adolescence*** to support measures development and implementation.
- ***A multi-method approach***- both conscious and unconscious aspects of attachment.

Relationship specific

Model of Measurement Approaches to Attachment in Middle Childhood

Bosmans, G., & Kerns, K. A. (2015). Attachment in middle childhood: Progress and prospects. In G. Bosmans & K. A. Kerns (Eds.), *Attachment in middle childhood: Theoretical advances and new directions in an emerging field*. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 148, 1–14.



Issues of measuring attachment in middle childhood and adolescence

- Concordance vs. discordance of attachment representations (double security)
- Attachment stability over time
- Is attachment distributed categorically or continuously?

Assessing attachment to mother and father

The study

- During transition to middle childhood, the exploratory— rather than the caregiving—system becomes increasingly important for the child's further development.
- The child's explorative behavior may be particularly encouraged within the attachment relationship with the father (Bretherton 2010; Kerns et al. 2015).
- Yet, the few studies that included a ***father*** character in story stems have focused on adoptive families (Barone and Lionetti 2011), single parent (Bernier and Miljkovitch 2009; Miljkovitch et al. 2012), and post-divorce families (Page and Bretherton 2001); only one study concerned attachment representations to mother and father, respectively, in children living with two parents (Portu-Zapirain 2013).
- **Aim 1-** to investigate ***concordance of attachment representations*** at a time around the transition from early to middle childhood (age 6).
- **Aim 2-** to assess ***convergence*** between dichotomous (secure/insecure) classifications obtained with the MCAST and SBST and continuous scores.

Sample and procedure

120 first grade children
(61 male and 59 female;
 $M_{Age} = 76.4$ months or 6 years and
4-months-old, $SD = 4.06$) were
assessed at age 6 twice (3 months
interval)



75 children (32 male and 42
female; $M_{Age} = 91.1$ months or 7
years and 7-months-old, $SD = 11.43$)



MCAST (Green et al., 2000)



12 months later

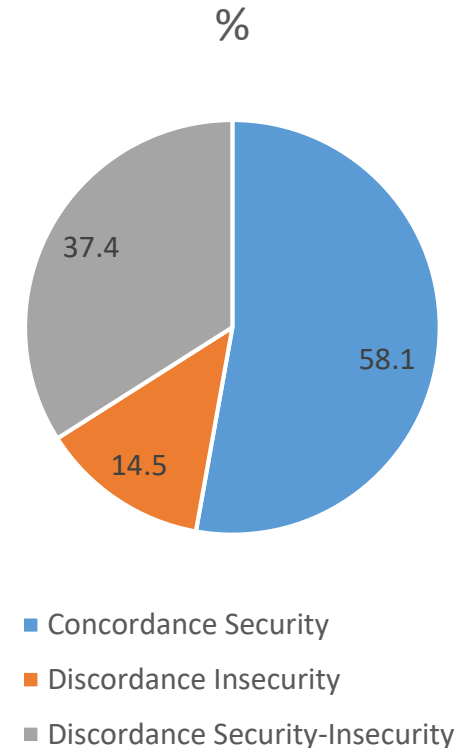
A. Robin's Math Test

Robin	sad	study plan
math test	mother/father	study together
unprepared	talk	feel better
many mistakes	help	sleep

(SBST, Psouni & Apetroaia, 2012, 2014)

Results

- **Significant concordance** was found for the two-way classification (Cohen's $k = .32$, $p < .0001$), with 58.1 % of children ($n = 68$) showing representations of secure attachment to both parents (59 % concordance in Fox et al. 1991; 62 % in Van IJzendoorn and De Wolff 1997; 65 % in Diener et al. 2008) and 14.5 % ($n = 17$) showing representations of insecure attachment to both parents.
- **On categorical level- no categorical convergence** between 2-way attachment **mother** (MCAST: Secure vs. Insecure) and scripted secure base knowledge (SBST: high vs. low scriptedness) ($\chi^2_{(1)} = .94$, $p = .33$, *ns*); 2-way attachment **father** (MCAST) and SBST ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 3.67$, $p < .05$, Cohen's $k = .19$).
- Consistent with that, children **securely attached to father (MCAST)** received significantly **higher scores in SBST** about a year later ($F(1,72) = 3.96$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .05$), controlling for verbal IQ.
- **On continuous level-** convergence between the MCAST SBS compound and SBST scriptedness scores was found for **father** ($r = .25$, $p < .05$) but not mother ($r = .16$, $p > .05$), controlling for verbal IQ.



What do these results mean?

- **Concordance** in the quality of attachment representations to mother and father (Diener et al. 2008; Fox et al. 1991; Monteiro et al. 2008; Steele et al. 1996; Van IJzendoorn and De Wolff 1997; Veríssimo et al. 2011).
- **Partial convergence** of attachment representations using the two narrative-based methods as **categorical and continuous analysis** indicated *concordance* between *attachment to father assessed by the MCAST and the SBST*.
- Findings not replicated concerning attachment to mother. When assessing the relation between attachment security by MCAST-mother (but not father) and SBST, there is a risk that their concordance is confounded by the shared variance with verbal abilities, becoming non-significant when verbal ability is controlled for.

Attachment to mother and father in dolls story completion- a closer look at the structure

1. Secure attachment

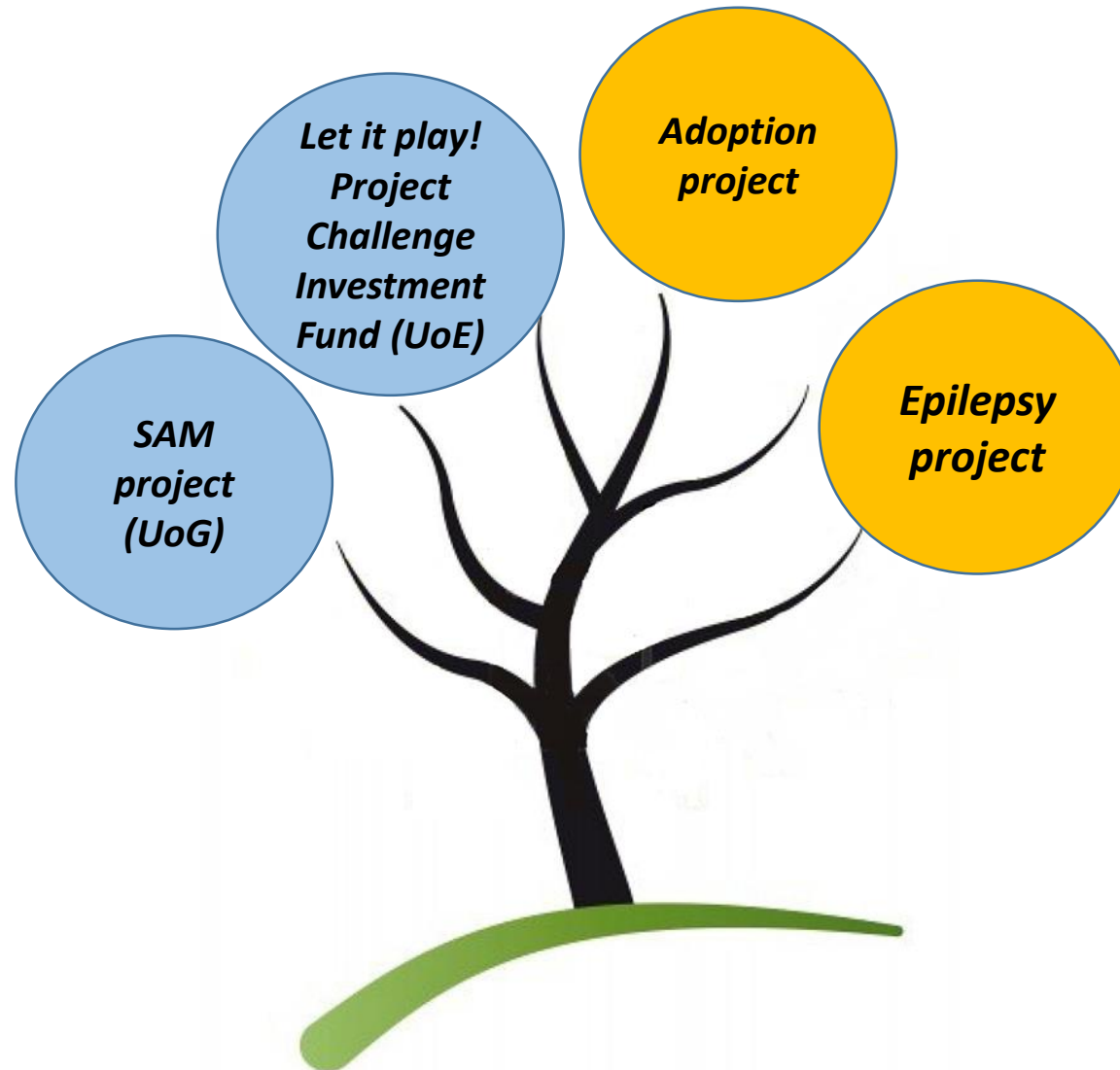
2. Intrusive and conflictual behaviors
bizarre themes (F) and reversal (M)

3. Disorganized (M)
and self-care strategies (F)

- First two factors in line with Green et al., (2000) and Barone & Lionetti's study (2012) using mother doll.
- Third factor not in line with previous studies: in Barone and Lionetti (2012) *child engagement* (arousal, engagement, and assuagement), whereas in Green et al. (2000) *anger and conflict behavior*.



More research...



Future directions



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- Including attachment assessment in a broader assessment and monitor it over time.
- Not rely only on attachment categories but on continuous scores.
- What is the contribution of ***attachment to father*** in the development of attachment representations in children and adolescents?

