Earned Security in Adolescence: Using a

Continuous Lens of Attachment

Abstract

In attachment literature, earned security is nebulously understood and measured insufficiently. Earned security, those with positive outcome despite strained relationship with their primary caregiver, share similar outcomes with those who are securely attached, those with positive experiences within their relationship with their primary caregiver. In attachment literature, strained experiences lead to less than ideal outcomes (insecure attachment). Earned security leaves unanswered questions about how negative experiences equate to positive outcomes. The Adult Attachment Interview has been unsuccessful at measuring the concept. The highly understudied continuous nature of attachment may clarify earned security. Using the continuous lens of attachment, more specifically Bronfenbrenner Ecological Model, with emphases placed in instrumental versus task oriented support may help to better understand earned security.

Introduction

Both earned security and the continuous nature of attachment are understudied and not sufficiently understood. In fact, there is even less information available on continuous attachment compared to earned security. Although there is limited research on both earned security and continuous attachment, both concepts can add interesting dimensions to attachment literature. *Earned security*, also known earned-secures, is currently defined in the literature as a phenomenon whereby an individual who presents as securely attached, individuals who are well-adjusted due to ideal parent-child relational experiences, despite reporting insecure attachment, less than ideal parent-child relational experiences that result in maladjustment, elements during their upbringing (Pearson, Cohn, Cowan, & Cowan, 1994; Venta, 2015; van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2014; Roisman et al, 2002; Roisman et al. 2014; Roisman & Haydon, 2011). *Insecure attachment* connotes a relationship with a primary caregiver that is characterized by a lack of closeness, emotional warmth (Bretherton, 1992; Broderick & Blewitt, 2010; Konishi & Hymel, 2014) and "pervasive negative childhood experiences" (Roisman & Haydon, 2011, p. 117) which often result in various maladjustments such as internalizing and externalizing problems (Doyle & Markiewicz, 2005) which leads to social and relational problems. *Secure attachment*, also known as continuous-secures, are those who have more positive interactions within their relationship with their primary care giver resulting in being well adjusted: having social competence and a healthy level of self-esteem (Bretherton, 1992; Broderick & Blewitt, 2010; Konishi & Hymel, 2014). A discrepancy in the literature exists due to earned secures reporting both significant challenges in their relationship with their primary care giver, which is characteristic of insecure attachment, as well as high levels of nurturance and support (Roisman & Haydon, 2011) which is characteristic of secure attachment. One

notable distinction of earned secures from insecure attachment and continuous secures is that

earned secures show high levels of internal distress but do not exhibit relational difficulty as

those that are insecurely attached (Phelps, Belsky, & Crnic, 1998; Roisman & Haydon, 2011).

Continuous attachment is defined as the "intersection/interaction of continuous

dimensions," (van IJendooran & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2014, p. 161) which this article looks

at the interaction of systems offered by Bronfenbrenner Ecological Model. This approach differs

which differs from the more commonly understood and discussed categorical attachment styles

such as secure or insecure (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010). These attachment styles focus primarily

on the parent-child interaction in isolation of the many other systems in which the parent-child

system interacts with. Through this continuous attachment lens, attachment is not the function of

only the parent-child interaction but the systems in which the parent-child relationship exist and

interact with. Furthermore, this may explain why earned secures report both positive and

negative experiences within their relationship with their primary caregiver. For example, a

caregiver may not be very compassionate and warm when it comes to their child's peer

relationships but may be warm and understanding when it comes religion, spirituality or faith.

Bronfenbrenner Ecological Model possesses the ability to consider other systemic influences on

the parent-child relationship and the factors that influence the development of an earned security.

The purpose of the study is to identify salient features of those with an earned security in

relation to four major environmental institutions or microsystems; religion, peers, job/career, and

family members. This study seeks to develop a better understand of earned security using a

continuous attachment lens. The hope is to arrive at a comprehensive understanding and

definition of earned security.

Benefits of this study include improvement in the continuous or systemic understanding of attachment which looks at how other factors or systems interact with the parent-child relationship. Current attachment literature can be limited in this way because it focusses primarily on the dyadic or categorical nature of attachment which is limited to the parent-child relationship. An increased understanding of earned security could help a variety of professions that work with children, adolescents and their families. It is estimated that 30% - 35% of the American population is insecurely attached (Siegel, 2010). Insecure attachment styles are associated with psychopathology in children and adolescence (Muris, Meester and Derg, 2003, p. 172). Research in this area of attachment could help to more clearly identify systemic factors that influence the development of an earned security.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a limited amount of research available on earned security that seeks to adequately define and measure the concept. Of the studies that are available, there is similarly the same number of articles that look specifically at earned security in adolescence (Venta et al, 2015) as there is in adulthood (Pearson et al, 1994; Saunders, et al, 2011) which is scarce. This project seeks to understand earned security in adolescents as well as how it can be adequately measured. Given the limited literature available for earned security in adolescence, research conducted regarding earned security in adulthood will be included here as well.

Earned security is not an easy concept to capture empirically primarily because earned security overlaps with both insecure attachment and secure attachment. Because of this overlap, it is unclear of what specifically contributes to the development of an earned security. For secure attachment and insecure attachment there are clear distinctions between the two; what factors contribute to them as well as developmental outcomes. Secure attachment is largely defined by

positive experiences within the parent-child relationship while insecure attachment is not.

Earned security fails to have a clear distinction such as these. Earned security appears to be a

space between secure attachment and insecure attachment; sharing qualities from both

categories. Yet, earned security is vaguely understood as its own distinct quality. For example,

those that are securely attached do not report significant problems in their relationship with their

primary caregiver as compared to earned secures who do (Roisman, Fortuna, & Holland, 2006).

Yet earned secures share the ability to sustain romantic relationships similarly to those that are

securely attached (Roisman, et al., 2014). Earned secures, by nature of their title, do not share

similar outcomes as those that are insecurely attached, such as internalizing and externalizing

behaviors, but report high levels of internal distress which is a characteristic of internalizing

problems (Roisman & Haydon, 2011). These distinctions appear to be insufficient as it does not

distinguish earned security from secure attachment and insecure attachment sufficiently that

identifies earned security as distinct (Pearson, Cohn, Cowan, & Cowan, 1994; van IJendooran &

Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2014). This lack of distinction may contribute to the lack of knowledge

on what constitutes an earned security. To further elucidate the dilemma of defining earned

security, van IJendooran & Bakermans-Kranenburg (2014) writes "earned-secures experience

average or better parental caregiving" (p. 158). From having both negative and positive

experiences to now having on average even better parenting raises suspicion about how earned

security is understood and measured.

Defining Earned Security

Given the current dilemma of obtaining a more distinct understanding of earned security,

it seems important to look at the current definitions of earned security. Although there are slight

differences in defining earned security in the literature, a central theme of earned security

emerges. Essentially, earned security denotes individuals who are insecurely attached in their childhood yet, in adulthood, maintain a coherent autobiographical narrative or balanced sense of self in relation to their upbringing that is reflective of those with a secure attachment (van IJendooran and Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2014; Roisman, Padron, Sroufe and Egeland, 2002; Phelps, Belsky and Crnic, 1998). This autobiographical narrative reflects language that demonstrates developmentally appropriate regulatory and cognitive skills when making sense of their upbringing. For example, an earned secure does not become swept away by recalling negative childhood experiences or avoiding discussing those experiences like someone with an insecure attachment. An earned secure, similarly to someone who is securely attached, can speak to both positive and negative childhood experiences in a rather reasonable manner. Earned security is defined by van IJendooran and Bakermans-Kranenburg (2014) as the equivalent of an adult secure attachment despite adverse experiences within the parent-child relationship in childhood. Roisman, Padron, Sroufe and Egeland (2002) define earned security as the "individuals that rise above malevolent parenting histories to break the intergenerational cycle" (p. 1204). Typically, the breaking of an intergenerational cycle is not a prominent feature of earned security but the challenge that comes with the development of an earned security is well communicated within this definition. Phelps, Belsky and Crnic (1998) define earned security as a "coherent perspective on their negative, early attachment relationships" (p. 21). Other definitions of earned security include significant disadvantages experienced within the parent-child or primary-care giver-child relationship (e.g., unavailable, unloving, neglectful, or abusive) yet secure/positive narratives or internal working models of self and others flourish just as a child who was securely attached throughout childhood (Roisman, Padron, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2002; Saunders, Jacobvitz, Zaccagnino, Beverung & Hazen; 2015). The American

Psychological Association (APA) definition includes language such as "successful adaptation, mental, emotional and behavioral flexibility, adjustment and resilience" which adds more specificity in defining earned security (Shibue, 2014. p. 23). Consequently, earned security within adolescence is similarly defined as earned security in adulthood (CITE). Venta et al (2015) describes earned security in adolescence as the recollection of unfavorable attachment experience yet coherence, objectivity and openness permeate the adolescence narrative when discussing such experiences. Therefore, given these definitions of earned security, the basis for earned security is someone who would likely develop an insecure attachment due to difficulty experienced within the parent-child relationship yet develops neither a secure or insecure attachment style but features more closely related to secure attachment.

Continuous and the Categorical Nature of Attachment

The categorical nature of attachment has dominated the way in which attachment is understood and discussed. It has distinct categories of attachment; secure attachment or insecure attachment which has three subcategories; preoccupied, anxious/ambivalent, or disorganized (Broderick and Blewitt, 2010). The continuous nature of attachment is a concept that has not been well researched and presents a paradigm shift in understanding attachment. van IJendooran & Bakermans-Kranenburg (2014) describes both concepts stating that continuous nature of attachment is "the intersection of continuous dimensions" while the categorical nature of attachment may represent "closely related data-points in a multivariate space" (p. 161).

This article looks at continuous attachment more systemically meaning the parent-child interactional quality does not exist in a vacuum, as attachment research seems to suggest, but is highly influenced by the systems in which they interact with, exist within and co-exist with. The categorical nature of attachment, which places a lot of emphases on the parent-child relationship,

can be viewed as the incubator for the coalescing or these interacting systems. The continuous

lens of attachment considers systems that inform and effect the beliefs of parents on how to be a

parent while the categorical lens of attachment observes the behaviors of those beliefs such as

warmth and responsiveness identified by categorical attachment research. Attachment research

does not identify systems that support such parental practices like religion or faith.

Operationalizing **Earned Security**

Earned security has been measured mostly by utilizing the Adult Attachment Inventory

(AAI) (Roisman, Haltigan, Haydon, Booth-LaForce, 2014). The AAI has been reported to be

limited in its ability to understanding and accurately measure earned security (van IJendooran &

Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2014). Furthermore, the AAI has been criticized is limitation in

recalling childhood experiences retrospectively (Roisman, Padron, Sroufe & Egeland, 2002).

The way in which the AAI defines what kind of attachment a person has is using its subscales;

loving, neglectful and rejecting parenting. Earned secures are typically defined by the AAI as

when at least one parent scores low in the loving scale and high on the rejecting or neglectful

scales. For example, Roisman et al (2002) operational definition for earned security consist of

having a coherent narrative with either one or both parents scoring low in the loving subscale and

high in either rejecting or neglecting subscale. Such operationalization helps in understanding

the complexity of earned security but may still be incompatible with the more commonly held

definition of earned security. Those with an earned security may report both positive (loving)

and negative (neglect and rejection) characteristics in their relationship with a primary care giver.

Roisman presumes that if love was not well received in one parent, then it was received by the

other. Those with an earned security report both positive and negative experiences in their

relationship with their a primary care giver. Furthermore, as reported in studies that have

utilized the AAI, it does not help to differentiate those with an earned security from those with

either an insecure or secure attachment (van IJendooran & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2014; Venta

et al, 2015).

The AAI is also said to be insufficient due to its retrospective approach in assessing

earned security. Due to changes that occur in the parent-child relationship overtime, one's self

report on past events is seen less than reliable. van IJendooran & Bakermans-Kranenburg (2014)

and Roisman et al (2002) argues that due to the persistent restructuring of autobiographical

narratives, it is impossible to capture such information definitively. Another criticism of the AAI

is that it is totally dependent upon self-coding and lacks other resources such as observations for

gathering information (Roisman, 2002). What is notable about the AAI is that it helps to

distinguish between instrumental/task oriented support (e.g., gift giving or doing for as opposed

to being with) and emotional support (e.g., being with such as listening to and spending quality

time together). This may be important in further defining earned security and creating

distinctions between its secure and insecure counterpart. It is possible that earned secures

experience distinct instrument support separate from secure attachment. Saunders et al (2011)

conducted a study that revealed emotional support had more of a positive impact on "overcoming

negative memories with parents" than instrumental support (p. 416).

Conclusion

To conclude, future research should seek alternative ways to understand and measure

earned security. This article suggests that a continuous perspective of attachment, as opposed to

a categorical one, may be more beneficial in understanding this phenomenon. It may be critical

to understand the systems that influence the parent-child relationship when the contradiction of

both positive and negative characteristics exist within the parent-relationship. Such knowledge

may encourage a more systemic understanding of earned security which may help to define and

understand the term more accurately. Instrumental versus task oriented supports may play key

role in the development of an earned security. Lastly, instead or gathering information

retrospectively, it may be more effective to research adolescence while they are currently in their

adolescent years.

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Tables and Figures

Figure 1

Secure Attachment   Earned   Insecure Attachment   Security