

# Stability of Attachment Representations: The Transition to Marriage

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This study examined the stability of adult attachment representations across the transition to marriage. One hundred fifty-seven couples were assessed using the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; C. George, N. Kaplan, & M. Main, 1985), the Current Relationship Interview (J. A. Crowell & G. Owens, 1996), and measures describing relationship functioning and life events 3 months prior to their weddings and 18 months into their marriages. The authors tested the hypotheses that attachment classifications are stable and that change is related to experiences in the relationship and/or life events; 78% of the sample received the same primary AAI classification (secure, preoccupied, and dismissing) at both times. Change was toward increased security and was associated with feelings and cognitions about the relationship. Only 46% of participants initially classified as unresolved retained the classification. Stability of the unresolved classification was associated with stressful life events and relationship aggression.

One of John Bowlby's primary goals in developing attachment theory was to preserve Freud's insights about the importance of early experience. To accomplish this, he reconceptualized the infant's first relationship as one in which the infant uses one or a few adults as a secure base from which to explore and, when necessary, as a haven of safety in retreat (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby 1969/1982; Bretherton, 1985). Beginning in infancy, ordinary secure base experience leads to expectations about self, the physical and social environment, and close relationships. Although initially sensorimotor representations, these expectations are eventually elaborated and consolidated as formal mental representations that Bowlby termed "attachment working models" (Bowlby, 1980; Bretherton, 1985). Bowlby hoped that the concept of attachment working models would provide a sound basis for conceptualizing and investigating the effects of early experience on adult-adult close relationships, parental behavior, and perhaps even adults' behavior toward aging parents.

Attachment representations are expected to be stable enough to account for the effects of early experience on later attachment behavior and, at the same time, open to revision in light of important relationship experiences throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. A number of studies have supported the idea that patterns of secure-base behavior and attachment working models are stable, yet open to revision, during infancy (Belsky,

Campbell, Cohn, & Moore, 1996; Vaughn, Egeland, Sroufe, & Waters, 1979; Waters, 1978) and from infancy to early adulthood (Hamilton, 2000; Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000). Stability has been demonstrated for up to 1 year in adulthood (Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 1993; Benoit & Parker, 1994; Crowell & Treboux, 1991; Sagi et al., 1994).

Although attachment theorists have sometimes spoken of attachment behavior and attachment representations as inherently stable, we now recognize that stability reflects the aggregate effects of a number of cognitive and social processes. Social and cognitive psychologists (e.g., Epstein, 1991; Schank, 1999) have suggested that early conceptualizations of important experiences are more general, and thus inherently more stable, than specific representations of subsequent experience. The stability of attachment representations is also buttressed by consistency in the caregiving environment. Caregivers do not instill confidence in their availability and responsiveness in infancy and then fade into the background. They continue to play an important role in organizing and helping consolidate secure base behavior, and they co-construct representations of attachment-related experiences throughout childhood and adolescence (Waters, Hamilton, & Weinfield, 2000; Waters, Kondo-Ikemura, Posada, & Richters, 1991).

One of Bowlby's most significant departures from the psychoanalytic tradition was his emphasis on the importance of real (as opposed to predominantly intrapsychic) experience and on ordinary (as opposed to traumatic) experience in shaping attachment representations. An important corollary of his emphasis on real experience is that attachment representations necessarily remain open to revision in light of experience, especially those in close relationships (Bowlby, 1988). One of the current challenges to attachment theory is to better understand change in attachment representations in response to both ordinary and extraordinary experiences. This involves moving beyond the passage of time *per se* to examine attachment representations across important changes in secure-base relationships such as the transitions to marriage and parenthood and in relation to stressful life events that challenge secure-base use and support within adult attachment relationships.

In this study we examined the stability of attachment representations across the transition to marriage. Marriage is a normative

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life event that potentially meets Bowlby's (1988) requirements for effecting change. Within an attachment perspective, the marital dyad creates a new caregiving environment and presents attachment experiences that may challenge previously held conceptions of attachment. In addition to new attachment experiences, marriage offers a physical and psychological distance from parents that may foster change in representations of early attachment experiences.

The stability of attachment representations was examined over a 21-month transition to marriage using the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan & Main, 1985; Main & Goldwyn, 1994) to assess adults' representations of attachment. First, because two variables can be related over time but not have the same correlates at each time, we examined the relationship correlates of the AAI classifications at each phase. Similar correlates over time would suggest that the AAI has the same meaning both before marriage and 18 months into the marriage.

Next, we examined whether attachment classifications assessed 3 months prior to marriage were related to the classifications assessed 18 months into the marriage. Low stability in attachment representations would indicate that the transition to marriage presents a significant normative event in which change in attachment representations is maximized. Conversely, very high stability would indicate that representations of childhood relationships are resistant to change and that marriage, per se, is not an impetus for such change.

Consistent with the idea that change in attachment representations is lawful and predictable, we hypothesized that change in the representation of one's childhood attachment experiences would be related to the couple's relationship, including the partner's attachment status, and/or the occurrence of significant life events and associated stress. It might also relate to the quality of the attachment representation itself. We examined relations between change in representations and a number of sociodemographic variables (e.g., IQ, education) and qualities of the marital relationship (e.g., discord, happiness, relationship aggression). To capture the effects of life events, we examined the occurrence of stressful life events across the 21-month interval as well as specific attachment-relevant life events (i.e., leaving the family home, living with the partner before marriage, and having a child) as they relate to change in security status. We also assessed whether change in representations was associated with a particular pattern of representations in the self or the partner.

This study examines two important theoretical issues that have significant methodological implications as well. First, it examines the influence of a powerful normative life event on the stability of attachment representations in adulthood, that is, the establishment of a new caregiving environment in the context of marriage. Focusing on this important transition period, the study also addresses an interesting practical and methodological question about using the AAI as an assessment tool and whether the developmental stage of an adult may have an impact on the interpretation of the AAI. Second, the study examines the influence of extraordinary events on the stability of attachment representations in young adult life. From a methodological perspective, this aspect of the study provides useful information as to the nature and characteristics of the "unresolved" classification, in comparison with those patterns that have developed in adaptation to a caregiving environment.

## Method

### Participants

One hundred fifty-seven couples were assessed 3 months prior to their wedding dates. The sample was predominantly White (95%) and at the time of recruitment was representative of the population of young adults obtaining marriage licenses in Suffolk County, NY. The mean ages for women and men were 23.5 years ( $SD = 1.5$ ) and 24.9 years ( $SD = 2.3$ ), respectively. None of the participants had been married before, and they had no children at the time of recruitment. The mean number of years of education was 14.8. Seventy-five percent of the individuals were from intact families of origin. On average, couples had been together for 51 months ( $SD = 25.66$ ). Forty-eight percent of the participants reported no serious relationship prior to their current partner, 36% reported they went steady with at least one other person but never considered marriage, and 16% had considered marrying someone else before their current partner.

The second assessment phase was approximately a year and a half into the couples' marriages ( $M = 18.7$  months,  $SD = 3.6$ ). Eighty-five percent ( $n = 134$ ) of the couples were married, 11% ( $n = 17$ ) had separated or divorced, 3% ( $n = 5$ ) of the couples had never married, and 1 couple postponed their wedding. At the second assessment, 109 intact couples and 2 single individuals still married to their original partners returned. Within the separated/never married couples, 10 individuals returned. Overall, 27% of the sample dropped out ( $n = 84$  individuals). This attrition rate is lower than the attrition reported in other longitudinal marital studies (see Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

No significant differences in age, education, length of relationship, and AAI coherence scores were found between participants who remained in the study and those who dropped out. Nonparticipation at the second assessment was associated with quality of the couples' relationships. Participants who did not return for the second phase of the study were more likely to have separated from their partners than were those who stayed in the study,  $\chi^2(1, N = 314) = 79.2, p < .01$ ; 81% of those who were no longer with their original partners dropped out of the study. Point biserial correlations examining the relation between nonparticipation and participation at the second assessment showed that those who did not return had lower coherence of discourse when interviewed about the relationship with the Current Relationship Interview (CRI;  $r = -.18, p < .05$ ). They reported greater relationship discord ( $r = .21, p < .05$ ), verbal aggression ( $r = .21, p < .01$ ), and threats to abandon the relationship ( $r = .13, p < .05$ ). They also had lower IQ scores ( $r = -.19, p < .05$ ).<sup>1</sup>

### Measures

*Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George et al., 1985).* The AAI assesses adults' representations of attachment on the basis of discussion of their childhood relationships with their parents and of the effects of those experiences on their development as adults, and as parents, if relevant. In a semistructured interview format, the AAI asks participants for adjectives describing their childhood relationships with parents and illustrative incidents supporting those adjectives; about feelings of rejection and experiences of being upset, ill, and hurt; and about separations, losses, and abuse. In addition, participants are asked about changes in their relationships with their parents since childhood, for descriptions of their current relationships with their parents, and for explanations regarding parents' behavior when the participants were children. Finally, participants are asked about the effects of early childhood experiences on their adult personality.

Past childhood experiences with each parent are rated on 9-point scales for loving behavior, rejection, neglect, pressure to achieve, and involving/

<sup>1</sup> Results regarding participation are provided for the total sample, including those who separated or divorced. Results do not change when couples who separated or divorced are excluded.

role-reversing behavior in the coder's opinion. Present state of mind regarding attachment is rated on a variety of scales including coherence (e.g., believability, clarity, relevance to topic), idealization of parents, stated lack of recall, passivity of speech, derogation of attachment or attachment figures, and current preoccupying anger toward parents. An overall attachment classification is made using prototypical descriptions of the attachment classifications and guided by the coder's ratings of participants' childhood experiences and present state of mind regarding their childhood experiences (Main & Goldwyn, 1994). Although all of the scales are important in guiding the coder's classification, the coherence scale reflects a general ability to present an integrated, believable account of experiences and their meaning that is considered necessary for a classification as secure. Using discriminant function analysis to assess the relative contribution of each scale to security, Waters, Treboux, Fyffe, and Crowell (2001) found that coherence was the best predictor of a continuous security score.

Participants are classified into one of the three primary classifications with respect to attachment: secure/autonomous, insecure/dismissing, or insecure/preoccupied. A transcript may also be assigned a "can't classify" category if it contains strong elements that are not typically seen together in a transcript (e.g., high idealization of one parent and high active anger at the other). In addition, a fourth classification of unresolved with respect to past abuse or loss may be assigned. The unresolved classification is given in conjunction with a best-fitting primary category and is considered an insecure classification that overrides the primary classification. Table 1 briefly summarizes the characteristics of each of the four classifications.

The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and scored from the transcriptions by two coders trained by Mary Main and Eric Hesse. Coders were blind to all other information regarding the participant. At the premarital phase, 297 interviews were scored; the remaining tapes had technical problems and could not be transcribed. Coders achieved 74% agreement for four classifications (secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and can't classify) on 84 cases ( $\kappa = .61, p \leq .01$ ). At the second assessment phase, 12 tapes could not be transcribed. Of the 217 available interviews, interrater agreement was calculated on 46 cases and was 76% ( $\kappa = .60, p \leq .01$ ). Interrater agreement was calculated separately for the unresolved classification. At the premarital phase, coders achieved 84% agreement on the unresolved classification ( $\kappa = .60, p \leq .01$ ) and 89% agreement ( $\kappa = .60, p \leq .01$ ) at the second phase. Disagreements between coders were settled by conference. Interrater agreement, before marriage and at 18

months of marriage, was as follows: coherence,  $r(84) = .66, p < .01$ , and  $r(46) = .65, p < .01$ ; lack of resolution of mourning,  $r(71) = .74, p \leq .01$ , and  $r(38) = .74, p \leq .01$ ; and unresolved regarding abuse,  $r(84) = .76, p < .01$ , and  $r(46) = .74, p \leq .01$ .

At the premarital assessment, 43% ( $n = 128$ ) of participants were given a primary classification of secure; of those, 19 were also given an unresolved classification. The insecure group was characterized as follows: 32.5% dismissing ( $n = 98$ ), 22.5% preoccupied ( $n = 65$ ), and 3% can't classify ( $n = 9$ ). Within the insecure groups, 15 dismissing subjects, 25 preoccupied subjects, and 5 can't classify subjects were also classified as unresolved. Mean AAI coherence scores and standard deviations for the classifications can be found in Table 2.

With respect to traumatic experiences, 75% ( $n = 222$ ) of the participants reported a significant loss at the first assessment. Twelve percent ( $n = 35$ ) reported both a loss and an experience that met AAI criteria for abuse, 2% ( $n = 7$ ) reported only an abusive experience, and 11% ( $n = 33$ ) reported no experience of either loss or abuse. As noted above, 64 participants were classified as unresolved, of which 83% ( $n = 53$ ) were considered unresolved for loss, 11% ( $n = 7$ ) unresolved for abuse, and 6% ( $n = 4$ ) unresolved for both loss and abuse.

*The Current Relationship Interview (CRI; Crowell & Owens, 1996).* The CRI was developed to assess representations of adults' attachment on the basis of discussion of their current relationship and other romantic relationship experiences. The interview asks the participant for adjectives describing the relationship with the partner and illustrative incidents supporting those adjectives; about experiences of being upset, ill, and hurt; and about separations. In addition, the participant is asked about factors that have influenced the relationship and the effects of the relationship on the participant's development.

The scoring system parallels the AAI scoring system in that experiences with the partner, discourse style, and believability/coherence are assessed using a number of scales. Rating scales are used to characterize the individual's behavior, the partner's behavior, and the individual's discourse style. The measure yields classifications similar to the AAI that reflect the participant's state of mind with respect to attachment in the adult relationship: secure, insecure/dismissing, and insecure/preoccupied. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the three classifications. The classifications reflect the behavior and thoughts of the participant with respect to adult-adult attachment rather than the behavior of the partner, or reports of feeling secure or satisfied within the relationship. Coherence

Table 1

*Adult Attachment Interview (Main & Goldwyn, 1994) and Current Relationship Interview (Crowell & Owens, 1996) Classifications*

Interview component	Secure	Dismissing	Preoccupied	Unresolved
Adult Attachment Interview				
Past experiences	Loving parents or any type of negative experience	Parents rejecting of attachment Poor recall, idealization	Parents involving role-reversing	Loss of or abuse by attachment figure
Present state of mind	Clear and coherent regarding past and effects of early relationships	Minimizes or denies effects of early experiences	Active anger at parents or passivity of thought	Disbelief/feelings of causality
Current Relationship Interview				
Experiences with partner	Any partner behavior Comforts and supports routinely or gives credible evidence of trying	Any partner behavior Dismisses partner's concerns or supports only if concern deemed important	Any partner behavior Reports anxiety or anxious behavior if partner has a concern and/or is intrusive with partner	
Present state of mind	Clear, coherent regarding importance of attachment in partnership Partnership is viewed as opportunity for growth of both partners	Dismisses attachment elements of relationship; focus on material/concrete goals and/or personal independence	Anxiety regarding relationship, manifested in anger at partner and/or confusion/passivity regarding function of the relationship	

Table 2  
Pre- and Postmarital Means (and Standard Deviations) for AAI Attachment Classifications, and Planned Orthogonal Contrasts Between Classifications With Partner AAI Coherence in Relationship Variables Controlled

Relationship variable	Premarital				Postmarital				Premarital $F(1, 295)$ / postmarital $F(1, 215)$		
	Secure	Dismissing	Preoccupied	Unresolved	Secure	Dismissing	Preoccupied	Unresolved	Secure vs. insecure	Unresolved vs. other insecure	Dismissing vs. preoccupied
AAI coherence	6.5 (1.4)	3.1 (1.0)	2.7 (1.1)	3.5 (1.4)	6.9 (1.0)	3.4 (1.2)	3.0 (1.1)	3.8 (1.9)	526.2**/408.9**	6.5**/4.9**	3.9**/ns
CRI coherence	5.1 (1.8)	3.5 (1.9)	3.9 (1.8)	3.6 (1.6)	5.2 (1.8)	3.6 (1.5)	4.5 (1.3)	4.0 (1.7)	43.74**/16.2**	ns/ns	ns/ns
Life events					5.9 (3.4)	5.3 (3.7)	8.2 (3.9)	7.3 (3.8)	na/4.79*	na/5.27*	na/6.26**
Frequency of discord	17.4 (11.9)	18.4 (12.6)	18.8 (11.3)	18.0 (12.1)	13.2 (8.3)	17.7 (12.3)	15.6 (14.2)	17.1 (9.3)	ns/5.8*	ns/ns	ns/ns
Aggressive behavior											
Verbal aggression	15.5 (15.7)	17.6 (15.9)	16.1 (15.2)	23.0 (23.0)	12.4 (11.2)	16.0 (16.0)	19.8 (21.9)	21.5 (22.8)	ns/5.9*	4.8**/ns	ns/ns
Physical aggression	0.8 (1.7)	1.3 (2.5)	1.0 (2.4)	1.8 (2.1)	0.7 (2.4)	0.9 (1.9)	1.4 (2.1)	1.8 (3.5)	3.8**/ns	3.8**/ns	ns/ns
Threats	0.8 (1.6)	1.5 (2.5)	1.5 (2.6)	2.5 (5.0)	0.6 (1.6)	1.3 (2.1)	2.0 (3.6)	1.8 (3.4)	5.9**/7.0**	4.9**/ns	ns/ns
Positive feelings											
Happiness	4.8 (0.8)	4.8 (0.8)	4.6 (1.0)	4.6 (1.1)	4.7 (1.0)	4.4 (1.0)	4.8 (0.9)	4.6 (0.9)	ns/ns	ns/ns	ns/ns
Passion	42.5 (4.8)	42.4 (4.9)	43.3 (4.8)	43.6 (4.5)	42.5 (5.4)	41.7 (6.0)	44.1 (4.8)	42.6 (6.3)	ns/ns	ns/ns	ns/ns
Intimacy	39.1 (3.0)	37.7 (4.6)	38.7 (4.4)	37.7 (4.4)	39.2 (2.9)	37.3 (4.7)	38.5 (4.5)	38.1 (4.7)	3.5+/4.2*	ns/ns	ns/ns
Commitment	46.9 (3.3)	47.3 (2.9)	47.3 (2.2)	47.5 (2.6)	47.3 (3.0)	46.0 (5.2)	47.8 (2.1)	46.3 (6.0)	ns/ns	ns/ns	ns/ns
Dedication	87.4 (8.3)	85.9 (8.8)	88.1 (8.4)	86.8 (9.4)	88.6 (7.2)	85.8 (9.2)	88.7 (5.4)	84.6 (12.5)	3.0+/ns	ns/ns	ns/ns

Note. AAI = Adult Attachment Interview; CRI = Current Relationship Interview.  
\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

reflects participants' ability to present an integrated, believable account of their own and their partners' attachment-related behaviors and their meaning. The coherence scale is highly correlated with a continuous security score derived from discriminant function analysis (Crowell, Gao, Treboux, & Owens, 1997).

At the premarital phase, 314 interviews were coded. The distribution of classifications was as follows: secure, 42%; insecure/dismissing, 37%; and insecure/preoccupied, 21%. Coders achieved 76% agreement for the three classifications on 63 cases (20%;  $\kappa = .63, p \leq .01$ ). Agreement between coders on the CRI coherence scale assessed before marriage was moderate,  $r(53) = .65, p \leq .01$ .

*The Family Behavior Survey (FBS; Posada & Waters, 1988).* The FBS assesses three dimensions of marital functioning: frequency of discord, happiness in the relationship, and aggression. The Discord scale asks respondents to indicate how often in the past 6 months they have disagreed with their partners on any of 18 topics (e.g., handling finances, career decisions, affection in the relationship, jealousy, dealing with in-laws and parents). Responses are recorded on a 6-point scale: *never, 1–3 times in the past 6 months, 4–6 times in the past 6 months, 7–9 times in the past 6 months, almost every week, and every week or more*. The items are similar to the discord items of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). Alpha coefficients were .88 for the premarital assessment and .87 postmarriage. The Happiness scale consists of one item asking respondents how happy they are in this relationship. Responses range from *extremely unhappy* (0) to *perfectly happy* (6). This item is identical to the general happiness item in the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976).

The Aggression scale consists of 66 negative behaviors that couples may engage in when having an argument or disagreement. Traditional measures of spousal aggression (e.g., the Conflict Tactics Scale; Straus, 1979) tend to measure aggressive behaviors across contexts (e.g., "How often did your partner push, grab, or shove you?"). In contrast, the FBS includes items that specify the context in which behaviors occur (e.g., "hit me during an argument"). Respondents are asked to indicate how often in the past 6 months their partners had engaged in those behaviors. Response choices are identical to those for the Discord scale, ranging from 0 (*never*) to 5 (*every week or more*). The Aggression scale is divided into three types of aggression: verbal aggression, physical aggression, and threats to abandon. The Verbal Aggression subscale has 46 items reflecting behaviors that are hostile but not physical (e.g., "screamed at me for buying something," "cursed at me during a disagreement," "said things to make me feel bad about myself";  $\alpha = .93$  before marriage, .94 postmarriage). The Physical Aggression subscale consists of 12 items describing mild physical aggression according to Straus (1979; e.g., "pushed me down during an disagreement," "slapped me during an argument";  $\alpha = .79$  before marriage, .84 postmarriage). The Threats to Abandon subscale consists of nine items about the partner threatening to leave the relationship (e.g., "started talking about breaking up," "got angry and was out all night," "threatened to leave me";  $\alpha = .84$  before marriage, .81 postmarriage).

*Sternberg Triangular Love Scale (STLS–Short Version; Aron & Westbay, 1996; Sternberg, 1988).* The STLS–Short Version is a 21-item scale that measures three aspects of love: intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. Intimacy refers to feelings of closeness and feeling connected ( $\alpha = .79$  before marriage, .80 postmarriage). Passion refers to romance, physical attraction, and sexually related phenomena ( $\alpha = .80$  before marriage, .84 postmarriage), and decision/commitment reflects the commitment to maintain one's love for one's partner ( $\alpha = .82$  before marriage, .94 postmarriage). Participants describe themselves and/or their relationship on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all true* to 7 = *extremely true*). Each subscale has seven items.

*Commitment Inventory (CI; Stanley, 1986; Stanley & Markman, 1992).* The CI is a 31-item scale measuring two components of relationship commitment: personal dedication and constraint commitment. Items are answered on a 7-point Likert-type scale rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The Personal Dedication subscale (14 items) refers to

the individual's desire to maintain or improve the quality of the relationship (e.g., "I am not seriously attached to anyone other than my partner";  $\alpha = .72$  before marriage,  $.69$  postmarriage). The Constraint Commitment subscale (15 items) assesses the degree to which forces other than personal dedication put pressure on the individual to maintain the relationship (e.g., "My family really wants this relationship to work";  $\alpha = .52$  before marriage,  $.60$  postmarriage). The internal consistency of the Constraint Commitment subscale was not acceptable, and hence it was omitted from subsequent analyses.

*The Life Events Survey (LES; Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, 1978).* The LES asks the respondent to indicate whether any of the 65 listed events occurred within the past 12 months and, if so, to rate on a 7-point scale the degree to which the event is considered negative or positive. The list includes marital, job-related, family, child, financial, health, death, and legal events. The scale was modified in two ways. The time period was extended to the preceding 18 months, and items were rated for stressfulness on an 8-point scale (1 = *not at all stressful*, 8 = *very stressful*) rather than whether they were considered positive or negative. To capture the effects of nonnormative events on the stability of attachment classifications, in this study we examined only the clearly negative events and their associated stress. Examples of the 43 negative events included major illnesses in the self or a family member, unemployment, legal problems, and death of a significant other person. The participants reported six events on average ( $SD = 3.5$ ). The 10 most common events that occurred across the 18-month interval were as follows: used up savings (64% of the participants reported this), sleeping problems (40%), family member hospitalized (35%), borrowed money or other financial problems (34%), trouble with in-laws (32%), sexual difficulties (27%), working overtime because of financial problems (27%), family member sick (23%), trouble with friends or neighbors (22%), and uncertain job (21%). Eighteen percent of participants had a close relative or friend die during the 18 months the participants had been married.

In addition, we coded the following life circumstances or events using information in the demographic questionnaires: lived with parents before marriage ( $n = 205$ ; of these, 119 reported they had never lived away from home before marriage) versus other living situation ( $n = 109$ ); lived with partner prior to marriage ( $n = 61$ ) versus other living situation ( $n = 253$ ); married at 18-month assessment ( $n = 268$ ) versus separated/divorced ( $n = 46$ ); and had a child at 18-month assessment ( $n = 26$ ) versus no children ( $n = 188$ ).

*The Henmon-Nelson Test of Mental Ability (Lamke & Nelson, 1973).* IQ was assessed with the Henmon-Nelson Test of Mental Ability, a timed, paper-and-pencil measure of general intellectual ability. The IQ score can be used as a basis for estimating Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale Full Scale IQ scores (Kling, Davis, & Knost, 1978; Thorndike, Cunningham, Thorndike, & Hagen, 1991). The range of items completed within the given 15-min time frame was 30–90, and the range of items correctly answered (raw scores) was 10–88, with a median of 49 items correct.

## Results

The first set of analyses was conducted to establish whether the adult relationship correlates of the AAI were comparable before and after marriage. Planned orthogonal contrasts between classifications for each assessment period were performed using the entire sample to determine whether the transition to marriage had an impact on the relation between attachment classifications and reports of feelings and behavior in the relationship.

The second set of analyses was conducted using the three primary classifications—that is, secure/autonomous, insecure/dismissing, and insecure/preoccupied—and excluded participants assigned to the unresolved classification. The primary classifications have their origins in ordinary or day-to-day parent–child interac-

tions, whereas the unresolved classification has its origin in traumatic experience. Hence, it was postulated that the two types of classifications would differ in overall stability and that factors associated with stability and change would also differ. Stability of the primary attachment representations was examined using kappa and percentage of correspondence in the sample of participants who received only a primary classification.

Third, we examined those participants who changed primary classification. We assessed whether individuals with particular AAI or CRI classifications were more likely to change than others and how demographic variables, partners' classifications, reports of the relationship, and/or intervening life events were associated with change in primary classification. Last, stability of the unresolved classification and factors associated with change were examined using parallel analyses.

### *Relationship Variables and Their Association With AAI Classifications Before Marriage and 18 Months After Marriage*

We first addressed the question of whether the AAI has the same meaning with respect to relationship variables across the transition to marriage. We conducted theoretically driven planned orthogonal contrasts of the premarital AAI classifications with relationship variables and also of the 18-month AAI classifications with concurrent relationship variables. The comparisons were as follows: (a) secure versus insecure (including all participants classified as unresolved), (b) unresolved versus other insecure (dismissing and preoccupied combined), and (c) dismissing versus preoccupied. Premarital and postmarriage mean scores and standard deviations for each classification on all dependent variables are presented in Table 2 along with the contrasts at each assessment. Because of low-level, but significant, assortative mating for AAI security (in 60% of couples, partners were classified as both secure or both insecure), the partner's AAI coherence was covaried for each contrast that was conducted on relationship variables. This analysis determined whether relations between the participants' AAI classification and their behavior and feelings were maintained after accounting for partner attachment security.

At both assessments, the secure group was of course more coherent in discussing their childhood experiences with parents (AAI) and also in discussing the attachment elements of their current relationship (CRI) than were those classified as insecure. Before and after marriage, individuals classified as secure were less likely to threaten to abandon the relationship. They tended to report greater intimacy and feelings of dedication before marriage. After 18 months of marriage, secure participants reported fewer negative life events over the interval between assessments. After marriage, participants classified as secure reported fewer arguments with their partners (discord frequency) and were less verbally aggressive than those classified as insecure. They also reported greater feelings of intimacy.

Before marriage, the participants classified as unresolved differed from other insecure participants in several areas. The unresolved group's AAI mean coherence score was higher. Unresolved participants were more likely to be aggressive in their relation-

ships, even after we controlled for partner AAI coherence.<sup>2</sup> No differences between the unresolved and other insecure groups were evident at the postmarriage assessment, with two exceptions. Participants classified as unresolved reported a greater number of intervening negative life events, and again they had a higher mean AAI coherence score than other insecure participants.

When the two primary insecure classifications were compared, there were very few differences between participants classified as dismissing and those classified as preoccupied. The participants classified as preoccupied had a lower mean AAI coherence score before marriage. The preoccupied participants reported more negative life events than those classified as dismissing after 18 months of marriage.

### Stability of the AAI Primary Classifications<sup>3</sup>

As noted above, because the nature of the unresolved classification differs conceptually from the three primary classifications, we conducted the analyses excluding the unresolved participants.<sup>4</sup> The following analyses are based on the 161 participants who received only a primary classification. Concordance between pre- and postmarital assessments was 85% when the dichotomous secure/insecure classifications were examined ( $\kappa = .70, p < .01$ ; see Table 3). Seventy-eight percent of the participants received the same primary classification (three classifications) at both assessments ( $\kappa = .62, p < .01$ ).

Examination of the stability of the individual classifications revealed that 71 (96%) of the secure participants maintained the same classification across the 21-month period. Forty-six (79%) of the dismissing participants received the same classification, as did 8 (27%) of those classified as preoccupied. Of the 36 participants who changed classification, 3 (8%) became insecure, 21 (58%) became secure, and 12 (33%) participants changed from one insecure classification to the other. Stability for the coherence scale was moderate,  $r(210) = .66, p < .01$ . The mean AAI coherence score increased from before marriage ( $M = 4.7, SD = 2.2$ ) to 18 months after marriage ( $M = 5.3, SD = 2.1$ ),  $t(160) = 3.92, p < .01$ .

### Change in Primary Attachment Classification

To examine factors associated with change in attachment classification, we developed four groups. Again, unresolved participants were excluded from the analyses because factors associated with change in the two types of classifications (primary vs. unresolved) were hypothesized to differ given that primary classifica-

tions are associated with the quality of the day-to-day caregiving environment and that the unresolved classification is associated with trauma. The four groups were (a) participants who were secure at both phases ( $n = 71$ ), (b) those who were insecure at both phases ( $n = 66$ ), (c) those who became secure ( $n = 21$ ), and (d) those who became insecure ( $n = 3$ ). Mean difference scores in AAI coherence between the phases provide an indication of the degree of change within each group: stable secure,  $M = 0.2, SD = 0.3$ ; stable insecure,  $M = 0.1, SD = 1.1$ ; became secure,  $M = 3.1, SD = 1.1$ ; and became insecure,  $M = -2.5, SD = 2.2$ . The sample size of the became insecure group was too small to yield meaningful results, so subsequent analyses compared the group that became secure with the stable secure group and the stable insecure group.

The became secure group is of particular interest in this study given that theory and research suggest that people may change for the "better" within the marital relationship (e.g., Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Cohn, Silver, Cowan, & Pearson, 1992; Rutter & Quinton, 1984). The first set of analyses examined the relations between change to security and the individuals' and their partners' AAI and CRI attachment classifications. The second set of analyses addressed possible mechanisms or predictors of change by examining whether the group who became secure differed before marriage from the stable insecure group in degree of insecurity, demographics, and/or relationship behaviors and feelings. The two groups were compared using  $t$  tests, and the results are presented in Table 4. A second set of  $t$  tests addressed the extent of change

<sup>2</sup>  $T$  tests comparing participants who were classified as unresolved secondary to loss (U loss;  $n = 53$ ) with those who were classified as unresolved secondary to abuse (U abuse;  $n = 11$ ) revealed that those unresolved for abuse were more likely to report discord at both assessments: premarital, U abuse,  $M = 27.2$ , U loss,  $M = 16.2$ ,  $t(62) = -2.8, p \leq .01$ ; 18 months, U abuse,  $M = 31.2$ , U loss,  $M = 15.4$ ;  $t(62) = -3.4, p \leq .01$ . They were both verbally (U abuse,  $M = 35.8$ ; U loss,  $M = 17.0$ ),  $t(62) = -2.1, p \leq .05$ , and physically (U abuse,  $M = 3.6$ ; U loss,  $M = 1.0$ ),  $t(62) = -2.0, p \leq .05$ , more aggressive and were more likely to threaten to abandon the relationship (U abuse,  $M = 4.2$ ; U loss,  $M = 1.3$ ),  $t(62) = -2.0, p \leq .05$ . After 18 months of marriage, participants who were classified as unresolved for abuse reported higher impact from negative life events (U abuse,  $M = 6.9$ ; U loss,  $M = 4.8$ ),  $t(62) = -3.1, p \leq .01$ .

<sup>3</sup> Attachment theory does not predict that gender will have an impact on stability of representations. Thus, the analyses were conducted on the total sample. We did, however, examine the relation between gender and stability. There were no differences between men and women in the distribution of major classifications,  $\chi^2(3, N = 297) = 2.85, ns$ . There was a trend for women to be more likely to change major classification, including change from one insecure classification to the other. Fourteen women and 7 men became secure, excluding premarital unresolved participants,  $\chi^2(2, N = 217) = 4.92, p \leq .09$ ; and 16 women and 13 men became secure, including unresolved participants. Women were more likely to receive an unresolved classification than were men (28% vs. 15%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 217) = 8.11, p \leq .01$ , but there was no difference between men and women in their patterns of change.

<sup>4</sup> We examined the concordance of primary classifications (secure, dismissing, and preoccupied) between the premarital assessment and the 18-month assessment using the total sample (including the unresolved participants, using their primary classifications). Seventy-seven percent received the same primary classification at both assessments ( $\kappa = .63, p < .01$ ).

Table 3  
Stability of Secure and Insecure (Dismissing and Preoccupied)  
AAI Classifications Across the Transition to Marriage

Before marriage	At 18 months of marriage		Total
	Secure	Insecure (dismissing and preoccupied)	
Secure	71	3	74
Insecure (dismissing and preoccupied)	21	66	87
Total	92	69	161

Note. AAI = Adult Attachment Interview.

Table 4  
*Comparison Between Became Secure and Stable Insecure AAI Change Groups for Premarital AAI and CRI Coherence, Life Events, and Demographics, and Relationship Reports*

Other variables	Became secure		Stable insecure		<i>t</i> (85)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
AAI coherence	3.2	1.1	3.0	1.0	<i>ns</i>
CRI coherence	4.7	1.9	3.6	1.7	2.46*
IQ	49.4	11.6	50.2	13.4	<i>ns</i>
Education	15.5	1.8	14.2	1.9	2.77**
Life events					
Negative events	5.9	4.0	5.5	3.3	<i>ns</i>
Impact of events	4.4	2.2	4.3	1.7	<i>ns</i>
Discord frequency	12.7	7.5	18.4	13.8	-1.84†
Relationship aggression					
Verbal aggression	15.0	12.9	18.3	17.5	<i>ns</i>
Physical aggression	.7	2.2	1.2	2.4	<i>ns</i>
Threats to abandon	1.5	2.6	1.2	2.1	<i>ns</i>
Positive feelings					
Happiness	5.0	1.0	4.6	0.9	1.92*
Passion	44.9	3.7	42.5	5.1	2.01*
Intimacy	39.8	2.3	37.8	4.4	1.97*
Commitment	48.2	1.2	47.3	2.6	<i>ns</i>
Dedication	90.9	4.4	86.6	8.1	2.29*

Note. AAI = Adult Attachment Interview; CRI = Current Relationship Interview.

†  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

by asking the question of how similar on postmarital variables the participants who became secure were to those who had been secure at both phases.

*Attachment representations and coherence.* Individuals who became secure did not differ in premarital AAI coherence from those in the stable insecure group (see Table 4); that is, the most secure insecure were not the ones who became secure. However, individuals who were stable insecure were more likely to be classified as dismissing before marriage (74%) than were those who became secure (45% dismissing),  $\chi^2(1, N = 87) = 5.8, p \leq .05$ .

Participants who became secure were more coherent in describing the attachment elements of their current relationships (CRI) before marriage than were those who were stable insecure (see Table 4). Chi-square analyses of the three groups by the three CRI classifications, conducted separately for men and women, were significant: women,  $\chi^2(4, N = 45) = 16.2, p \leq .01$ ; men,  $\chi^2(4, N = 42) = 13.2, p \leq .01$ . Results showed that the became secure group was similar to the stable secure group in the distribution of premarital CRI classifications (64% and 70% CRI secure, respectively), and were more likely to be classified as CRI secure than were the stable insecure group (23% CRI secure).

After 18 months of marriage, participants who became secure did not score as high on the AAI coherence scale as did the stable secures (became secure,  $M = 6.2, SD = 1.0$ ; stable secure,  $M = 7.0, SD = 1.0$ ),  $t(91) = -3.45, p \leq .01$ . However, there was no significant difference in their mean CRI coherence scores after marriage (became secure,  $M = 4.9, SD = 1.8$ ; stable secure,  $M = 5.3, SD = 1.8$ ),  $t(91) = -.79, ns$ , or in their CRI classifications (CRI secure: stable secure, 61%; became secure, 58%),  $\chi^2(2, N = 86) = 2.1, ns$ .

*Partners' attachment representations.* As noted above, there was low-level assortative mating with respect to AAI attachment

security before marriage, that is, 60% correspondence between partners for secure versus insecure classifications,  $\chi^2(1, N = 297) = 4.9, p \leq .05$ , and 42% concordance for three-way classifications,  $\chi^2(4, N = 297) = 6.4, ns$  (see Table 5). These results are consistent with the modest concordance found in meta-analyses conducted by van IJzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg (1996). At the 18-month assessment, concordance between partners' classifications was not significant: 54% correspondence for secure versus insecure classifications and 45% concordance for three-way classifications.

Secure men and women were similar in their tendency to choose a secure partner (women, 51%; men, 58%; see Table 5). Nevertheless, it is possible that change in attachment security is related to the attachment status of the partner (Das Eiden, Teti, & Corns, 1995; Dozier, Cue, & Barnett, 1994), with those who became secure being more likely to have a partner who was classified as secure. Chi-square analyses of the three groups by secure and insecure classifications of the partners were conducted separately for men and women: women,  $\chi^2(2, N = 150) = 7.1, p \leq .05$ ; men,

Table 5  
*Concordance of Partners' AAI Classifications Before Marriage*

Women	Men			Total
	Secure	Dismissing	Preoccupied	
Secure	34	23	10	67
Dismissing	12	18	11	41
Preoccupied	13	16	10	39
Total	59	57	31	147

Note. Forty-two percent of couples had corresponding classifications. AAI = Adult Attachment Interview.

$\chi^2(2, N = 147) = 6.4, p \leq .05$ . Men and women who became secure were less likely than those who were stable secure to have a secure partner and were no more likely than those who stayed insecure to have a secure partner. Although subsample sizes are too small for statistical comparison, cross-tabulation tables suggested that became secure participants who were dismissing or preoccupied before marriage did not differ in partner status (secure, dismissing, and preoccupied). In other words, no combination of "changer"/partner premarital AAI classifications appeared more likely to favor a person's becoming secure. The premarital CRI classification of the partner was not related to becoming secure: women,  $\chi^2(2, N = 150) = 0.9, ns$ ; men,  $\chi^2(2, N = 150) = 2.2, ns$ .

*Demographics and life events.* The became secure group was more educated than the stable insecure group (see Table 4) before marriage, but there was no difference in their IQ scores or the durations of their relationships. There were no differences between the stable secure and became secure groups in education, IQ scores, or the duration of their relationships.

Individuals who became secure did not differ in the number of negative life events experienced across the transition to marriage, or in their impact, from those in the stable insecure group or the stable secure group.

Specific experiences such as living away from parents, living with the partner prior to marriage, separation/divorce from the partner, and having a child were examined using chi-square analyses. Becoming secure was not related to having a child or to separation/divorce from the partner. There was a trend for those who became secure to have lived away from parents prior to marriage,  $\chi^2(2, N = 174) = 4.69, p < .10$  (45% became secure vs. 24% stable secure and 35% stable insecure), and a greater proportion of those who became secure lived with their partners prior to marriage,  $\chi^2(2, N = 174) = 8.46, p < .05$ . Thirty-six percent of the became secure group had this experience, compared with 10% of the stable secure group and 19% of the stable insecure group.

*Relationship variables.* Individuals who became secure reported more positive feelings about their partners and relationships (greater happiness and greater feelings of intimacy, passion, and dedication) before marriage than stable insecure individuals, and they reported less discord (see Table 4). These two groups did not differ in relationship aggression. There were no differences between the became secure and the stable secure groups in relationship behaviors or feelings after 18 months of marriage.

### Stability of the Unresolved Classification

Stability for being classified as unresolved or not unresolved was 81% overall ( $\kappa = .41, p < .01$ ; see Table 6). One hundred forty-eight (70%) individuals were not considered unresolved at either phase. Of the 50 individuals who were scored as unresolved before marriage and who returned for the second assessment, 23 (46%) maintained their unresolved classification. Fourteen (9%) of the 162 individuals who were not unresolved before marriage were classified as unresolved 21 months later. There was evidence of stability for lack of resolution of mourning,  $r(176) = .51, p \leq .01$ , but not for unresolved trauma (abuse),  $r(11) = .17, ns$ .<sup>5</sup>

Table 6  
*Stability of Unresolved AAI Classification Across the Transition to Marriage*

Before marriage	At 18 months of marriage		Total
	Not unresolved	Unresolved	
Not unresolved	148	14	162
Unresolved	27	23	50
Total	175	37	212

Note. AAI = Adult Attachment Interview.

### Change in Unresolved Status

Four groups were developed to examine variables associated with change in unresolved status: (a) participants who were not unresolved at either time (not-U/not-U), (b) stable unresolved (U/U), (c) became unresolved (not-U/U), and (d) no longer unresolved (U/not-U). Mean difference scores between the assessments for lack of resolution of mourning were as follows: not-U/not-U,  $M = -0.01, SD = 1.6$ ; U/U,  $M = 0.04, SD = 1.2$ ; not-U/U,  $M = 2.1, SD = 2.6$ ; and U/not-U,  $M = -1.70, SD = 1.0$ . Because there was no theoretical basis for planned contrasts and because sample sizes were sufficient to examine all four groups, analyses of variance (ANOVAs) of the unresolved change groups were conducted.

*Attachment representations and coherence.* Women, but not men, in the stable unresolved group were more likely to be classified as preoccupied (43%) than those who had never been classified as unresolved (19%) or those who became unresolved (7%),  $\chi^2(6, N = 162) = 21.8, p \leq .01$ . There were no differences in CRI classifications among the four groups. One-way ANOVAs revealed that the groups differed in premarital AAI coherence but not CRI coherence. Not surprisingly, post hoc comparisons showed that those who had never received an unresolved classification had higher scores on AAI coherence: not-U/not-U,  $M = 4.8, SD = 2.2$ ; U/U,  $M = 3.8, SD = 1.7$ ; not-U/U,  $M = 4.2, SD = 2.1$ ; and U/not-U,  $M = 4.0, SD = 1.3$ .

*Partners' attachment representations.* Partners' AAI and CRI primary classifications were unrelated to unresolved change status. Partners' unresolved status was unrelated to unresolved change status.

*Demographics and life events.* One-way ANOVAs of unresolved change groups were conducted for IQ scores, years of education, and durations of relationships. No differences were found among the groups.

One-way ANOVAs indicated that the unresolved change groups differed with respect to the overall number of negative events occurring over the intervening 21-month period,  $F(3, 200) = 5.64, p < .01$ . Examination of the domains of events showed that the groups differed in the numbers of financial problems reported,  $F(3, 201) = 4.48, p < .01$ ; family problems,  $F(3, 200) = 4.29, p < .01$ ;

<sup>5</sup> Forty-two participants identified themselves as having been abused at the premarital assessment, but only 11 of them identified themselves as abused at the second assessment. Twenty participants who had not reported abuse at the first assessment reported abuse at the second phase.



marital problems,  $F(3, 201) = 3.71, p < .05$ ; personal problems,  $F(3, 200) = 3.30, p < .05$ ; and job uncertainty,  $F(3, 201) = 3.03, p < .05$ . Post hoc analysis indicated that the stable unresolved group reported, overall, more negative events than the other groups, especially in the domains of job, family, and personal problems. No differences in stress associated with the life events were found among the groups. As with the major classifications, the unresolved change groups were compared, by means of chi-square analyses, for experiences such as separation/divorce, having a child, living away from parents, and living with a partner prior to marriage. Change in unresolved status was not related to any of these experiences.

We were particularly interested in the relation between the recent experience of loss and the stability of the unresolved classification, so this life event was examined separately. As indicated above, the stable unresolved and the became unresolved groups were not more likely to have experienced the death of a family member or friend within the interval between assessments. However, the participants in the no longer unresolved group (U/not-U) were more likely to have had a loss within the year prior to their premarital assessment,  $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 4.40, p \leq .05$  (42% vs. 22% of the other groups combined), suggesting that recent loss may result in temporary perturbations in state of mind.

*Marital relationships.* With respect to reports of the marital relationship,  $4$  (change group)  $\times 2$  (premarital vs. postmarriage) ANOVAs indicated a significant main effect for change group in participants' aggressive behaviors. Individuals in the stable unresolved group (U/U) were more verbally ( $M = 36.7, SD = 6.3$ ),  $F(1, 194) = 6.06, p < .01$ , and physically ( $M = 2.7, SD = 3.8$ )  $F(1, 194) = 3.61, p < .05$ , aggressive and more likely to threaten to leave their partners ( $M = 3.8, SD = 3.2$ )  $F(1, 194) = 6.48, p < .01$ , than were individuals in the other groups (verbal aggression: not-U/not-U,  $M = 14.6, SD = 14.3$ ; not-U/U,  $M = 15.7, SD = 13.0$ ; U/not-U,  $M = 14.9, SD = 12.7$ ; physical aggression: not-U/not-U,  $M = 0.9, SD = 2.1$ ; not-U/U,  $M = 0.4, SD = 0.7$ ; U/not-U,  $M = 1.1, SD = 1.4$ ; threats to abandon: not-U/not-U,  $M = 1.0, SD = 2.0$ ; not-U/U,  $M = 0.9, SD = 1.5$ ; U/not-U,  $M = 0.9, SD = 1.4$ ). There were no differences in unresolved change groups in their reports of positive feelings in relationships. There were no main effects for time of assessment and no interactions.

## Discussion

Consistent with theoretical predictions, adult attachment representations were highly stable over time and the transition to marriage. The association between attachment classifications and relationship variables was consistent before marriage and after marriage, suggesting that, for the most part, the AAI has the same meaning across this important life event. Seventy-eight percent of the participants received the same major classification across the 21 months. These findings are consistent with previous research on the stability of AAI classifications (Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 1993; Benoit & Parker, 1994; Crowell & Treboux, 1991; Sagi et al., 1994). Change in attachment security (secure/insecure) was predictable and associated with factors that attachment theory suggests facilitate change in mental representations. In contrast to the major classifications, the unresolved classification was not stable in this normative sample of young adults.

## *Implications of Adult Attachment Representations Before and After Marriage*

The AAI is stable across time and, for the most part, has similar meaning with respect to relationship variables across the transition to marriage. However, before marriage, the secure/insecure dichotomy was associated specifically with threats of abandonment and not with other types of aggressive behaviors. By 18 months of marriage, the secure/insecure dichotomy was related to frequency of discord, verbal aggression, and threats of abandonment as well as to feelings of intimacy. Insecure participants reported more difficulties in their relationships, which suggests that problems and less functional coping strategies are evident as the couples spend more time together, possibly as attachment-relevant demands in their relationships become more prominent. In contrast, secure participants reported greater feelings of intimacy in the relationship at both assessments. The results suggest that the relationship with the partner leads to positive feelings for individuals classified as secure, perhaps because of opportunities to share and interact in significant and valued ways in the relationship. Links between mental representations and behaviors and feelings in adult relationships may become clearer as the attachment elements of the relationship develop and assume greater prominence in the relationship. Further research is needed to examine how and the degree to which the AAI will predict adult relationship variables over the course of a partnership.

Attachment researchers and clinicians have been interested in differences among the subtypes of insecurity. The dismissing and preoccupied classifications and their corresponding infant classifications are frequently conceptualized as stylistically and strategically opposite (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Main & Goldwyn, 1994). On the basis of these differences, hypotheses could be made about the marital feelings and behavior of the two groups (e.g., the preoccupied group would be more likely to threaten to abandon the relationship, whereas the dismissing group would be likely to report lower feelings of intimacy). However, no stylistic differences in self-reports were found between the dismissing and preoccupied groups at either assessment phase, although both types of insecurity were associated with difficulties in the relationship. Although our measures assess a wide range of marital functioning, they may not be sensitive enough to capture strategic or stylistic elements. For example, individuals classified as dismissing and preoccupied both reported relatively low feelings of intimacy, but one group might have done so because intimacy was not highly valued, whereas the other might have done so because they desired greater intimacy. From the perspective of attachment theory and the adaptive functioning of the attachment system, what is primary or most crucial is that insecurity be associated with impaired secure-base behavior and relationship functioning. In this context, the ways in which insecure attachments are expressed then become important, for example, in considering such questions as how emotion regulation interfaces with the attachment system. From a clinical or intervention perspective, assessment of strategic and stylistic qualities is also extremely useful. For the purpose of understanding secondary strategies, it appears that finer measures are required that will capture important qualitative differences in cognitive and behavioral styles.

A different pattern of results emerged when the dismissing and preoccupied groups combined were compared with the insecure/unresolved classification. At the premarital assessment, the participants classified as unresolved were more likely to be aggressive in their relationships than were those who had a primary insecure classification. Although the sample sizes were small, our exploratory analyses suggest that participants classified as unresolved for abuse rather than unresolved for loss were responsible for this finding. Future researchers should further explore links among unresolved status, attachment insecurity, and aggressive behaviors and should be alert to differences within the unresolved classification.

### *Stability and Change of Primary Attachment Representations*

A central tenet of attachment theory is that representations based on early attachment experiences should be stable. Our findings are consistent with this hypothesis, and marriage, per se, was not an impetus for change. The secure classification in particular was very stable across the transition to marriage, with remarkably few individuals who were originally classified as secure designated insecure at the second assessment. The finding suggests that once a secure representation is achieved or clearly known and understood, it is very difficult to unlearn, undermine, or distort, even in the face of a close relationship with a partner who has an insecure attachment representation. In contrast, the insecure classifications were less stable. Dismissing individuals were less likely to change than were those classified as preoccupied. This difference may be due to the dismissing characteristic of resisting and limiting access to attachment-relevant information. Preoccupied individuals may be benefited by the increased proximity to a partner afforded by marriage and by a willingness to discuss past experiences with their partners. The results are consistent with the hypothesis that representations are scriptlike in nature (Waters & Rodrigues, 2001). In this perspective, a secure representation, or "secure-base script," is learned from repeated experiences with consistently supportive and responsive attachment figures. Insecurity reflects a lack of knowledge of the use and function of a secure-base relationship because of attachment experiences that have not been adequately understood and/or assimilated. From a clinical perspective, it is good news that experiences that might degrade an already acquired adaptive and successful knowledge base appear to be rare and that opportunities to learn new attachment-relevant information are available.

With this idea in mind, the participants who became secure across the transition to marriage were of particular interest. This group represented 64% of the change in insecurity. A number of factors indicate that this change was true change and not due to measurement error. These individuals did not differ in their initial coherence scores from those who stayed insecure. The difference in their coherence scores across the transition was substantial rather than borderline, such that they could definitively be scored as secure at the second assessment. Last, the correlates of change suggest that the change was lawful, that is, predictable by attachment theory. In reviewing these individuals' transcripts, we found it interesting that none of them said, "Aha, I used to think one way 18 months ago, and now I think this new way." Those who became secure did so without much explicit awareness but rather

through expanding on their reports of the past and drawing more consistent and coherent inferences from their memories.

Several of our findings suggest that opportunity for and openness to experience played a role in facilitating change, and limited access to new opportunities was associated with remaining insecure. Most of the young adults in the sample had very close connections to their families of origin. More than one third had never lived away from home, and two thirds lived with their parents throughout their engagements. In this context, it was of interest that those who had higher education, lived away from their parents, and/or lived with their partners prior to marriage were more likely to become secure. This suggests that experiences and opportunity in such settings (e.g., exposure to new ideas, new people, and new relationships), as well as physical and psychological distance from parents, facilitate the reconceptualization of childhood attachment relationships.

Attachment theory states that mental representations are open to revision in light of important relationship experiences throughout childhood, adolescence, and adult life, and our findings support this key hypothesis. A powerful opportunity for change appears to have been afforded by the developing adult partnership. Individuals who became secure were more coherent in describing and valuing the attachment elements of their adult relationships (i.e., classified as CRI secure), and they reported more positive feelings about their relationships than did the individuals who remained insecure. Thus, it appears that change in their general attachment representation (AAI) was influenced, or at least preceded, by positive feelings and experiences and secure, coherent cognitions about attachment (CRI) within the relationship with the partner. Marriage offers a wide variety of experiences that inform a person about his or her partner's availability as well as the partner's demands along attachment-related dimensions. Secure-base support between partners occurs in ordinary circumstances and also in emergency situations requiring collaboration between partners (i.e., severe illness, loss). When faced with interactions that differ from expectations based on parent-child models, particularly within the context of a highly satisfying relationship, the individual may reframe perceptions about the availability and trustworthiness of attachment figures overall.

Of interest was that partners' attachment security was not a factor in predicting change. This finding is not consistent with the idea that a secure partner is a necessary or key ingredient for helping an insecure person develop a secure representation, even if security in a partner may help an insecure person behave more effectively (Cohn et al., 1992; Das Eiden et al., 1995). The results suggest that a committed, devoted, but insecure partner can be as effective as a secure partner in fostering growth and change in the individual and may even be relatively tolerant and supportive of a partner's secure-base "missteps" (Crowell & Treboux, 1999). On the basis of this study, we cannot say whether the partner actually offered an optimal secure-base caregiving environment or simply a different experience that promoted positive perceptions and change. Neither can we tell whether more participants will become secure as they have more experiences and secure-base opportunities with their partners or whether there is a critical window of opportunity in the course of the relationship. Nevertheless, it appears that key life events, in and of themselves, including the transition to marriage, are not an impetus for change in attachment representations. The findings support the idea that actual secure-

base experiences and perceptions of those experiences do shape and alter individuals' attachment representations (Bowlby, 1980; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Future studies should examine the implications of this change with respect to attachment-related behavior with a partner and children (Sroufe, Egeland & Kreutzer, 1990) and the stability of the classification over a longer time interval.

### *Stability and Change in the Unresolved Classification*

According to Bowlby, nonnormative events such as loss may overwhelm the attachment system temporarily, suggesting that unresolved status in some cases may be a time-limited phenomenon. Indeed, our findings suggest this may be the case. Only 46% of those individuals classified as unresolved before marriage received the same classification 21 months later; 9% became unresolved over that time interval. Furthermore, loss in the year just prior to marriage was associated with initial unresolved status but with resolution at the postmarital assessment.

Research on the analogous infant classification, the disorganized pattern, has revealed similar variation in stability, ranging from 30% to 67%, even in disadvantaged or atypical samples (Barnett, Ganiban, & Cicchetti, 1999; Lyons-Ruth, Repacholi, McLeod, & Silva, 1991; Vondra, Dowdell Hommerding, & Shaw, 1999), which suggests that instability may be intrinsic to the classification. The unresolved state of mind does not represent an attachment organization per se but is a perturbed state of mind that sometimes results from experiences of loss or abuse (Main & Goldwyn, 1994). Our study supports the idea that the properties of this classification differ from those of the primary classifications (i.e., secure, dismissing, and preoccupied).

Unlike change in the primary classifications, change in the unresolved classification was not related to opportunities or experiences in relationships. Rather, consistent with the traumatic origins of the classification, its expression was associated with extraordinary experiences, that is, stressful life events and relationship aggression. Results indicate that individuals who are unresolved across longer periods of time differ significantly from those who are temporarily disorganized. It appears that those who are stable unresolved are more vulnerable to experiencing stressful life events and more volatile in their responses in relationships and/or that repeated traumatic experiences are required to maintain the unresolved status. Insofar as many aspects of the unresolved classification are similar to qualities of posttraumatic stress disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), qualities of the current relationship or life experience that are reminiscent of early experience would be likely to support and even exacerbate the mental disorganization. Thus, one could hypothesize that being in an aggressive relationship, either as victim or perpetrator, would maintain an unresolved state of mind, particularly if the individual was unresolved for abuse. Similarly, recurring negative experiences could trigger or maintain the perturbed state of mind even if the events themselves are not identical to the original loss(es) or trauma.

Because of the relatively low rates of abusive experiences in this normative group, we were not able to effectively address this hypothesis or to compare the stability associated with each type of traumatic experience (loss and abuse) or the frequency or severity of past traumatic experiences. In fact, the stability of the Unre-

solved for Abuse scale was not statistically evident in this sample. Only 26% ( $n = 11$ ) of those who reported childhood abuse in the premarital assessment reported it again at the second assessment. Due in large part to this small sample size, the correlation between the scores on the Unresolved for Abuse scale at the two assessments was small and statistically nonsignificant. (One participant had very discrepant scores between the two assessments, apparently having resolved her abuse, and 8 out of the remaining 10 participants had scores within 1 point on the scale at the two assessments). Thus, it seems that methodological problems may also have contributed to the observed instability of the unresolved classification. Scoring and hence the continuum of disorganization are subject to interviewer effects (i.e., amount of probing) and how much the participant chooses to reveal about an incident. In such situations, stability effects may be masked. Despite the limitations imposed by the sample and by methodological issues, our results have important research implications for both high- and low-risk samples with respect to the unresolved classification. The results clearly highlight the need to pursue factors associated with more severe or stable disorganization rather than temporarily perturbed states of mind.

In conclusion, a profile of high stability emerges for primary attachment organization over time and across the transition to marriage, with theory-relevant correlates of change in mental representations. It appears that adult attachment representations have largely stabilized in early adulthood, but opportunities for change clearly exist in the context of a new caregiving environment, the marital relationship, even if the partner is not secure. For the unresolved designation, a more complex picture emerges, one that will be better understood as research delineates the meaning, function, and correlates of this classification and its subtypes. The study has methodological implications for the AAI itself. Marriage, an important developmental transition of adult life, does not appear to have a strong impact on the interpretation of the AAI's meaning as an assessment tool. However, the results do suggest that the AAI is a more powerful tool for understanding adult relationships when the secure-base aspects of the partnership have had an opportunity to develop and life experiences arise that challenge the adult attachment system.

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