

Stony Brook University The Graduate School

Doctoral Defense Announcement

Abstract

Implicit Assessment of Secure Base Attachment Representations

By

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At the heart of attachment theory is the secure base phenomenon. Bowlby (1969) postulated that infants use an attachment figure as a secure base from which to explore and as a haven of safety when threatened. Over time, he believed these interactions became consolidated in the child's mind as an unconscious internal working model. Although this model concept is now outdated, recent research using experimental methodologies has shown that researchers can explore the content and organization of unconscious attachment representations. Mikulincer, Gillath, and Shaver (2002), for example, were the first to use sequential priming to investigate the protective function of implicit attachment representations. They demonstrated that subliminal threat primes lead to increased accessibility of names of attachment figures in a lexical decision task (LDT).

The goal of the current study was to replicate and extend this work using both the LDT and the pronunciation task, a newer priming technique that does not share key limitations of the LDT. Sixty undergraduates' knowledge of a prototypic secure base script was assessed before they were exposed to three priming sessions. The first, a replication of Mikulincer et al.'s study, investigated whether threat primes increase accessibility of mother representations. The second session explored secure base representations – is the concept of “my mother” associated with positive or negative secure base expectations and is this effect qualified by script knowledge. For comparison, the third session investigated whether mother primes facilitate recognition of general positive and negative descriptors.

Results indicate that threat primes did not increase accessibility of mother representations as compared to neutral persons. However, “my mother” prime words did speed recognition of positive secure base expectations but only for people demonstrating knowledge of the secure base script. Low scriptedness was associated with mother primes facilitating negative representations. These effects were found only in the pronunciation task. In the third session, script knowledge was not associated with mother primes facilitating access to general positive or negative adjectives, indicating that knowledge of a secure base script is only associated with specific expectations about the availability of an attachment figure and not other positive associations.

Date: December 3rd, 2007

Time: 2:00 pm

Place: Psychology B, 112

Program: Psychology

Dissertation Advisor: Everett Waters, PhD