

# A Methodological Framework For Exploring Attachment Hierarchy Stability

## INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of mobile phone ownership and use of text messaging amongst Australians heralds a new, exciting opportunity for expansion of repeated measures research in a number of areas, including attachment research.

People turn to a network of attachment figures throughout their life<sup>[1,2,3]</sup>. Research suggests there is a hierarchical structure to an individual's attachment figure network, with some attachment figures being sought out more than others<sup>[1,4,5]</sup>.

Limited test-retest data suggests that though environmental factors impact on attachment behavior, attachment relationships and the relative importance of those relationships are stable over at least a one-month period<sup>[3]</sup>.

There is to date no research exploring the stability of the attachment hierarchy in a repeated measures, naturalistic setting. Such research could uncover in unprecedented detail the stability of the attachment hierarchy in the context of transient daily life factors that may impact on attachment behaviour.

**The goal of the current study was to develop a methodological framework with which to explore the stability of attachment hierarchies over time, in a naturalistic setting.**

## METHOD

33 participants aged 18-62 (M = 24) years

## ATTACHMENT STUDY

Please answer as honestly as you can, thinking about the past day. For questions 3 to 6, please give a number between 1-5 for each person listed on your card (higher numbers meaning that person was more important in the last day). There is an example format on the back of this card.

1. How stressed were you today? (1-7, with greater numbers meaning more stress)
2. Did you experience any stressful events today? If so please specify briefly? (e.g. exams, break-up, accident)
3. Of your close relationships, who was it important for you to see today? (5 is the most important, to 1 is the least important)
4. Who were you most upset to be separated from today, regardless of the length of time? (5 is most upset, to 1 is least upset)
5. If needed, who would be available for you today? (5 is most available, 1 is least available)
6. Who, if anyone, did you go to for support and/or comfort today?

(76% female) were asked to nominate between one and five attachment figures before completing several attachment questionnaires.

Every two days for two months (30 measurement occasions) they responded to SMS prompts to reply with their answers to the adjacent questionnaire.

This was supported by collateral data of a total of eight weekly email questionnaire about frequency of voice call and SMS contact with the nominated attachment figures. At a subsequent follow-up meeting, participants completed final questionnaires and reflected on the the ongoing portion of the study.

## RESULTS

There was a 76% response rate to SMS prompts, and 60% to email.

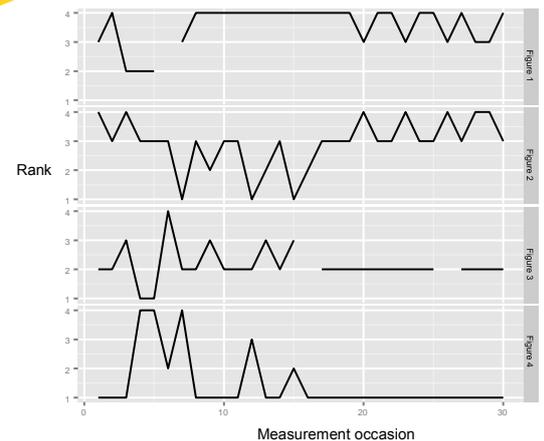
Mixed hierarchical logistic regression revealed that the number of nominated attachment figures was significantly associated with non-responses ( $\chi^2(3)=10.44, p=0.02$ ), but not response completeness ( $\chi^2(1)=0.06, p=0.81$ ), indicating that the more burdensome response requirements of more attachment figures impacted whether a participant began a response, but not the full completion of responses given.

Participants Nominated an average of 4 attachment figures (ranging from 2 to 5 per participant)

Missingness in the SMS portion was significantly associated with missingness in the email portion within individuals ( $\chi^2(1)=11.22, p<0.000$ ).

After participating, 9% of participants rated the convenience of using SMS as poor, 26% as neutral, and 65% as good. 13% rated the privacy of using SMS as poor, 26% as neutral, and 61% as good.

Given the choice for data gathering method for completing the attachment questionnaire every two days, 65% would rather participate via SMS, while 5% would prefer to do so via paper, 26% online, and 4% by way of a digital device supplied by the researcher.



Stability of one participant's nominated attachment figure ranking over a 60 day period, sampling every second day (30 sampling occasions)

## DISCUSSION

This methodological framework successfully supported exploring the stability of an attachment hierarchy over time in a naturalistic setting.

The data collection element of this methodological framework was successful, providing unprecedented rich information about attachment hierarchies across time, in a naturalistic setting. The challenge now is to develop techniques suitable for the analysis of this ordinal, time-series data.

**The SMS methodology yielded novel, rich data, and participants reported positive perceptions of the methodology.**

The SMS response rate was somewhat stable across the 60 day period, there was not a marked increase in non-responses as the study progressed.

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Response and non-response rates to SMS prompts across 30 occasions

## REFERENCES

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