

# How stable are attachment narratives?

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# Stability of the Life Story

- Life story considered as one level of personality (McAdams, 2013)
- Implication: life stories exhibit some stability throughout life
- Various forms of stability:
  - Narrative Style
  - Narrative Themes
  - Content

# Stability of the Life Story – Repeated Content

- Important life events of emerging adults:
  - 12% after two weeks (Thorne, Cutting, & Skaw, 1998)
- 10 key life events of emerging adults:
  - 22.5% after 3 months;
  - 17.2% after 3 years (McAdams et al., 2006).
- Increasing with age:
  - From 30 to 40% in emerging adulthood (Köber & Habermas, 2017)

## Stability of the Life Story – Childhood memories

- Memories from earlier periods = building blocks of ongoing life story and personal meaning-making (Conway & Holmes, 2004; McAdams, 1993)
- The earliest memory:
  - 82% after four years (Bauer, Tasdemir-Ozdes, & Larkina, 2014)
  - 54 % after both 12 and 22 years (Josselson, 2000)

# Childhood Memories and Attachment

- Childhood memories = building blocks of attachment representations
- Adult Attachment Interview asks for experiences with caregivers
- Attachment representations = cognitive script (Schank & Abelson, 1977)
- Secure Base Script = temporal-causal representation of secure base and support (Waters & Waters, 2006)
- Early attachment experience -> a cognitive script -> coherent overarching autobiographical representation of attachment (Waters et al., 2017)

# Questions

1. How stable are attachment narratives?
2. Does memory stability vary between caregivers?
3. Are negative or positive memories more stable?
4. How does this relate to attachment?

# Sample

- Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation
  - Children of young first time mothers ( $M$  age = 20.8)
  - All living below the poverty line
  - All receiving prenatal care at city public health clinics
  - 59% of the mothers were single

Sroufe, L. A., Egeland, B., Carlson, E., & Collins, W. A. (2005). *The Development of the Person: The Minnesota Study of Risk and Adaptation from Birth to Adulthood*. New York: Guilford Publications.

# Procedure

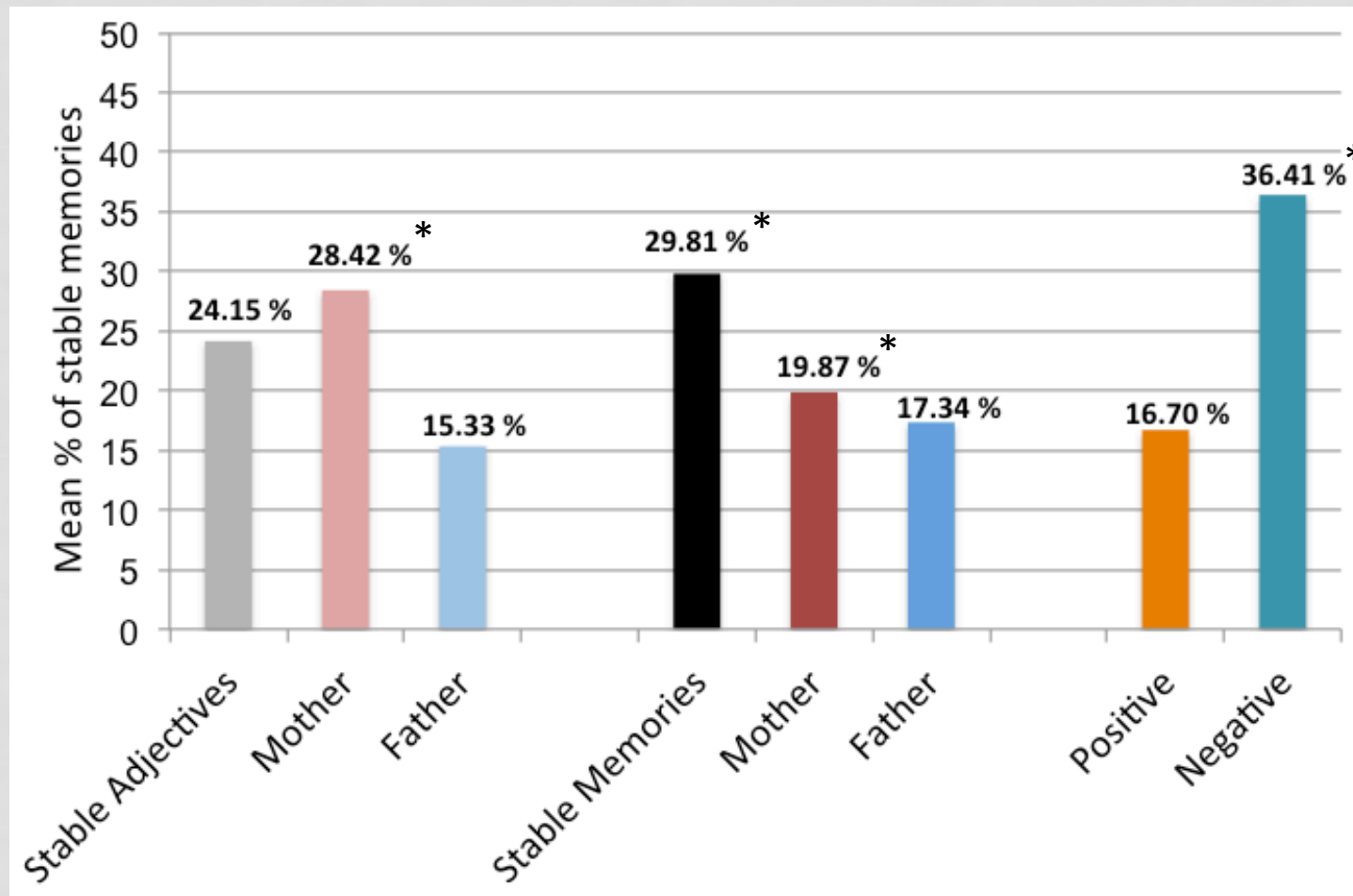
- 151 participants provided AAls at 19 years and of 26 years
  1. Asks for five adjectives per Caregiver
  2. Experiences representing the named adjective
  3. Experiences when participants were...
    1. Emotionally upset
    2. Physically hurt
    3. Sick
    4. Separated from parents for the first time
    5. Feeling rejected by parents
    6. Threatened by parents
    7. Loss of a parent or close other



# Coding

- Coded for:
  1. Stability = repeated content
  2. Valence of memory
  3. Secure base script knowledge (Waters et al., 2017; Waters & Facompré, in press)

# Preliminary Results – Stability



N = 75

## Preliminary Results – Relation to Secure Base Script Knowledge

N = 75

	Secure Base Script Knowledge at 19	Secure Base Script Knowledge at 26
Stable Adjectives	.423*	.201
Stable Memories	.064	-.025
Stable Positive Memories	-.039	-.064
Stable Negative Memories	.162	.078

# Conclusion

1. About 30 % of attachment narratives are stable across 7 years.
2. Memories of maternal caregiving are more stable than of paternal caregiving.
3. Negative memories are more stable than positive memories.
4. Stability of attachment memories correlates rather low with secure base script knowledge but slightly higher with stability of negative memories.

-> Negative experiences are deviant from the script and therefore presumably outstanding in terms of memory retrieval .