HOW CAN I BECOME MORE SECURE?: A GROUNDED THEORY OF EARNING SECURE ATTACHMENT

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The purpose of this study was to develop a grounded theory of earning secure attachment. This study included 15 women and 5 men who met the criteria of having a self-reported history of attachment insecurity and demonstrated evidence of earned security. The grand tour research question, How do adults with a history of insecure attachment earn security?, *was explored using constructivist grounded theory and semi-structured interviews emphasizing processes of positive attachment change. The results describe a process model of change hinging on three interrelated categories:* meta-conditions of positive attachment change, making intrapsychic changes, *and* making interpersonal changes. *Clinical implications include the importance of clients committing to the process, clients working with a clinician trained in trauma-focused therapy, and clinicians being surrogate attachment figures for clients.*

Insecure attachment in close relationships is financially (Ciechanowski et al., 2002), relationally (Dutton & White, 2012), and physically costly (McWilliams & Bailey, 2010). While insecure attachment is associated with various costs, those with secure attachment experience a number of benefits. For example, they may be more likely to survive major health conditions like cancer (McWilliams & Bailey, 2010), incur fewer healthcare costs, and be less likely to report clinically significant depressive symptoms (Ciechanowski et al., 2002). Likewise, securely attached people tend to have overall healthier and more satisfying friendships and relationships (Weimer, Kerns, & Oldenburg, 2004) and more positive interpersonal expectations than those with insecure styles (Rowe & Carnelley, 2003). They also experience more positive emotions, stronger self-esteem (Lopez, 2009), display more self-reflection, have increased metacognitive abilities, and report coping with stress in healthier ways as compared to insecure peers (Fonagy & Target, 1997). People with secure attachment also tend to see themselves as worthy of love (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The benefits of secure attachment are clear, and helping

people earn security is worthwhile and important. Earning security is the process by which a person with insecure attachment from childhood becomes more secure at a later time in life (Hesse, 2008; Main et al., 2008; Saunders, Jacobvitz, Zaccagnino, Beverung, & Hazen, 2011). Scholars refer to these people as "earned-secure" to distinguish them from continuously secure and insecure individuals (e.g., Saunders et al., 2011). Although a few established therapeutic approaches cite attachment change as an anticipated result of treatment (e.g., emotionally focused therapy [EFT], Johnson, 2004; attachment-based family therapy, Diamond, Diamond, & Levy, 2014), the exact processes by which adults make those changes, both within and outside of therapy, are not well understood.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Development of Attachment Styles

According to attachment theory, people's lived experiences with their caregivers in infancy and early childhood produce attachment bonds that carry into adulthood (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). These bonds are formed especially during times of distress and are either stabilized or revised based on these interactions (Bowlby, 1958, 1969/1982). Attachment bonds are relational, as infant and caregiver must be attuned to communicate emotions and attachment needs (Parker et al., 2012). Bonds will be more or less secure or insecure (anxious/avoidant), depending on how available and responsive the caregiver is to the child's needs (Bowlby, 1969/1982), consistent with recent conceptualizations of attachment in terms of a spectrum, rather than categorically, which implies a person could display some level of both secure and insecure attachment beliefs and behaviors (e.g., Minde, 2003). Insecure attachment includes multiple subtypes of anxious and avoidant attachment (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970), which for simplicity we refer to collectively as "insecure attachment."

Attachment theory contends that child–caregiver attachment forms the basis for attachment "models" or "styles" of how people will interact in close relationships in adulthood (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Adult attachment theory suggests people will project the symbolic expectations of their childhood caregivers onto other adult close relationships, either expecting them to be dependable, trustworthy, and safe, or not (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). These bonds also shape their own sense of worthiness of love and care (Bowlby, 1958, 1969/1982). Close relationships could be romantic relationships, platonic friendships, relationships with family members, or in some cases, psychotherapists (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), and attachment security can fluctuate across relationships (Crittenden & Landini, 2011). Knowing what attachment styles are and with whom they can form is foundational to understanding how and why they might change.

How Attachment Styles Change

There has been a plethora of attachment-related research, though qualitative studies of attachment change are sparse. Existing research predicts attachment styles from infancy will remain about the same into and throughout adulthood for a majority of people, leading some scholars to believe attachment styles are more likely to stay the same than to change (Waters et al., 2000a, 2000b, 2000c). However, while attachment styles are formed early in people's lives and for the most part continue to inform how people view and interact with self and others, Bowlby (1969/1982) argued these working models are "always subject to revision and updating in response to subsequent social experiences" (as cited by Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p. 118). For example, over a 2-year period, one of the earliest studies examining attachment change found 13% (n = 16 of 121) of participants in a female-only sample experienced a change from secure to insecure styles, and 15.7% (n = 19) experienced change from insecure to secure, where change was not affected by life experiences or circumstances (Davila, Burge, & Hammen, 1997). Another study of couples found that 22% (n = 35 of 157) of couples changed styles from 3 months premarital to 18 months into marriage (Crowell et al., 2002).

Other studies show attachment styles are about both stability and change, with each being needed in various contexts (Waters et al., 2000b, 2000c), as people "constantly construct their experience of attachment" in close relationships (Johnson & Whiffen, 1999, p. 371). Thus, the argument is no longer whether attachment is *only* stable or *only* changing but rather when, how,

and under what conditions it does change or remain constant (Waters et al, 2000b). Early theoretical arguments about what contributes to constructions of attachment realities include "habitual ways of regulating . . . emotions and cognitive processes that may be heavily influenced by the past, such as selective attention, memory encoding, and inference and explanation processes" (Collins & Read, 1994; as cited by Johnson & Whiffen, 1999, p. 371). Other ways attachment styles may change are through negative life experiences and circumstances (Waters et al., 2000b), new information and interactions with intimate partners in the present (Johnson, 2004; Johnson & Whiffen, 1999), and undergoing a corrective emotional experience (Johnson, 2004; Johnson & Whiffen, 1999). Theoretically, this means when a partner responds to proximity-seeking behavior in unexpected ways, his/her concept of how secure the relationship is may be revised. Based on Bowlby's original conceptualization of attachment styles as changeable, as well as the subsequent supporting evidence, we begin from an assumption that attachment styles can and do change in adulthood. Therefore, for this study, the primary question is not *if* attachment styles change but rather *under what conditions* do they change positively?

Positive Attachment Change and Earning Security

Positive attachment change is more commonly known as earning security and describes people who developed insecure styles in childhood and become more secure at some point in life (Hesse, 2008; Main et al., 2008; Saunders et al., 2011). Scholars have explored two possible explanations of how earning security occurs. The first is the theory that positive change is possible when people have flexible (or less rigid) original cognitive models of self and other (Davila et al., 1997; Johnson & Whiffen, 1999). This idea comes from Bowlby's notion that insecure attachment styles are only a problem when they are applied in a rigid way to novel situations or relationships in distress (Bowlby, 1969/1982). From this angle, it seems reasonable that therapy, for example (which helps people find new coping and communication skills, ways of interacting, etc.), should be effective for helping people earn security. Several studies examining attachment change as a result of attachment-oriented therapy support this theory (e.g., Burgess Moser et al., 2015).

The second explanation is the idea that alternative support figures are important components of earning security. One recent study by Saunders et al. (2011) found 13% (n = 16 of 121) of new mothers classified as "earned-secure" using the Adult Attachment Interview retrospectively and the stringent classification criteria recommended by Main and Hesse (Hesse, 2008; Main, Goldwyn, & Hesse, 2008). They identified two potential pathways for earning secure attachment: (a) receiving emotional support from an alternative support figure and (b) spending more hours in therapy (earned-secure women spent an average of 22.5 hr in therapy [SD = 46.85]; Saunders et al., 2011). While Saunders et al. asked participants about type of therapy received, they did not report those details in their manuscript.

As demonstrated by Saunders et al. (2011), spending more time in therapy may prove to be an important avenue for positive change. This may help explain why studies on couple therapy have shown mixed results of promoting positive attachment change, as each study used a different number of sessions (Johnson et al., 2015; Johnson & Whiffen, 1999; Seedall, Butler, Zamora, & Yang, 2015). Existing evidence suggests some experience positive attachment change in the context of couple therapy while others do not (Seedall et al., 2015). For example, Seedall et al. (2015) studied 48 couples across six sessions using what they referred to as "therapist-centered" and "client-centered approaches." In all, 19 couples with higher initial attachment anxiety exhibited increased anxiety part-way through therapy (between sessions 3 and 4) and did not move back toward security by the end of the study. However, the remaining subgroups of couples (low anxiety and high anxiety; high avoidance) in their sample reported statistically significant decreases in overall insecurity, but at different times in the study.

Johnson et al. (2015) also set out to examine avoidance and anxiety in 461 couples across eight sessions of couples' therapy in a treatment-as-usual setting, finding women's attachment anxiety to be the only construct that showed significant improvement, and that was still minute. On the other hand, Burgess Moser et al. (2015) demonstrated significantly decreased anxiety and avoidance in relationship-specific attachment following an average of 21.3 sessions of couple therapy using EFT with 32 couples, where attachment anxiety reduction was attributed to completing a blamer-softening event. The difference in length of treatment between the studies by Seedall et al. (2015),

Johnson et al. (2015), and Burgess Moser et al. (2015) may help corroborate Saunders et al.'s (2011) conclusion that more time spent in therapy is an important factor in increasing attachment security. Additionally, other studies reported positive attachment style change following the course of individual therapy (e.g., Daniel, 2006; Diamond, Stovall-McClough, Clarkin, & Levy, 2003), psychoanalytic inpatient treatment (Fonagy & Target, 1997), as well as group therapy formats (e.g., Kinley & Reyno, 2013). Clearly, further exploration is needed to better understand why attachment changes for some and not for others.

Gaps in the Literature

Preferably, research would track attachment styles in real time from infancy to adulthood, examining processes related to positive change. However, longitudinal databases with qualitative attachment style data either do not exist or are not available for public use, leaving researchers to rely on retrospective methods. A major gap in the attachment styles literature is the absence of an empirically derived model explaining how people earn secure attachment and under what conditions. There is a line of evidence for what might cause a person to move from security to insecurity (e.g., Davila et al., 1997; Hamilton, 2000; Waters et al., 2000a) than how positive change occurs. While some quantitative research on pathways to earned security identifies two possible explanations for positive change (i.e., emotional support and more time in therapy; Saunders et al., 2011), attachment change literature lacks an empirical study exploring a wider set of possible explanations. Additionally, little is known about how male's attachment styles change, as most of the research studying attachment change has used female samples (e.g., Davila et al., 1997; Saunders et al., 2011), though they have not specified why they used female-only samples. This lack of specific knowledge about positive attachment style change supports the use of grounded theory methodology to better understand the processes both men and women use to earn secure attachment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand the process of earning secure attachment for adults and develop a theory explaining the processes and behaviors involved. Our conceptualization of earning security refers to a shift in attitudes and behaviors associated with insecure attachment toward attitudes and behaviors aligned with secure attachment. The grand tour research question explored in this study was, How do adults with a history of insecure attachment earn security? Based on the gaps in the literature, secondary research questions included the following: What specific conditions make earning security possible? What role does therapy play in participants' attachment change? How do participants' close relationships influence their processes of earning security?

GROUNDED THEORY METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

This study used constructivist grounded theory as outlined by Charmaz (2014) to construct a theory about positive attachment change (i.e., earned security). In the original formulation of grounded theory methods, as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the methodology was positivist, in the sense that the methods were presented as a route to develop (or "discover" in the authors' terms), accurate theoretical explanations of the processes being studied. The assumption was that if the procedures were followed objectively, then theory would emerge as a result. In the constructivist tradition, researchers are assumed to be an active participant in the development of the theory as they formulate the questions, participate in the interviews, and make sense of the content. In this tradition, a grounded theory is a co-construction of both participants' data and researchers' interpretations. While acknowledging researcher presence in the process, it was also important to be reflexive and tentative in interviewing and interpreting the data without checking with the participants. A constructivist design is ideal for understanding positive attachment style change because attachment is an inherently interpersonal process, best understood by talking directly to those who are in the process of creating meaning in their own relationships (Johnson & Whiffen, 1999).

Researcher Reflexivity

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although not unique to qualitative research, this suggests that the process is a human endeavor, informed by the values, worldviews, and contexts of those who are performing it (e.g., Gergen, 2015). In this study of attachment, there were particular issues related to gender and training that came up as the sample was found and interviews commenced (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Reflexivity includes a self-monitoring of one's a priori assumptions and views, and a consideration how these influenced the research process. In this study, I am (first author who conducted all interviews) a European American, Protestant Christian female in my late 20s. I have advanced training in attachment theory, and I practice clinically from an attachment lens. I am aware of my own attachment history and relationships, and I approached the study with an assumption that earning security was possible. The second and fourth authors have extensive experience with grounded theory research. All authors are family systems scholars and family therapy practitioners. Throughout the study, the authors remained reflexive of how backgrounds and training influenced the research process, and we endeavored to remain faithful to the experiences of the research participants. This involved multiple discussions about the data gathering and the analytic decisions that were being made, including specific discussions about how the attachment training of some of the researchers and participants was shaping the language and formulations of the results.

Sampling and Participants

This study received approval from an Institutional Review Board prior to recruitment and data collection. We recruited participants through purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling to find people first who had experienced positive attachment change. We recruited participants via public social media (Facebook and Twitter) and email listservs of marriage and family therapists (MFTs), emerging MFT professionals, and therapists with training in EFT. All participants completed a screening survey of 16 modified questions (8 for childhood and 8 for adulthood) from the *Experiences in Close Relationships Scale-Short Form* (ECR-S; Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007). Internal consistency for the unmodified ECR-S was adequate ($\alpha = .86$ [Anxiety] and $\alpha = .88$ [Avoidance]), and test–retest reliability was adequate ($\alpha = .80$ [Anxiety] and $\alpha = .83$ [Avoidance]) (Wei et al., 2007). For this study, wording was changed from "a partner"/"romantic partners" to "caregivers" in the childhood questions and to "loved ones" in the adulthood questions given the researchers' desire to ascertain the security of child–caregiver attachment and more inclusive adult attachment relationships, respectively. Sample items include "My desire to be very close sometimes scared my caregivers away" (childhood) and "I find that loved ones don't want to get as close as I would like" (adulthood). Items are on a 7-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 4 = Neutral, and 7 = Strongly Agree. Items 6 and 8 on both the childhood and adulthood questionnaires were reverse scored. Higher scores on questions 1–4 indicate higher levels of anxious attachment, while higher scores on questions 5–8 indicate higher levels of avoidant attachment. Sum scores of 24 or greater indicate participants are predominantly insecure (either more anxious or avoidant). Of the 86 people who completed the survey, 20 people (5 men and 15 women) qualified for and agreed to participate in the study. The following inclusion criteria were used: participants needed to (a) endorse an insecure relationship with primary caregivers in childhood (modified ECR-S sum score >24) and (b) demonstrate a decrease in total modified ECR-S scores of at least 5 points between the childhood to adulthood questionnaires. If these conditions were met, researchers deemed participants as having taken at least some steps toward earning security. All participants completed a demographic questionnaire during the screening process. Table 1 presents the summary of demographic characteristics of the 20 participants.

Interview Procedure

Those qualifying for the study were interviewed in depth using a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews began with a brief reflection of what participants reported in their screening surveys to operationalize what the researchers meant by "becoming more secure" for each participant and ensure shared meaning of the term across participant. We developed interview questions from the literature, including the gaps we identified. Primary questions were as follows: "Tell me about

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Adults Demonstrating Earned Security (N = 20)

Gender % (*n*)	Male 25% (5)	Female 75% (15)			
Marital Status	Married (1st)	Married (2nd+)	Single/Never Married	Dating/Divorced/Widowed	
	70% (14)	5% (1)	10% (2)	15% (1/1/1)	
Race/Ethnicity	Caucasian	Hispanic	Native American	Iranian	
	80% (16)	10% (2)	5% (1)	5% (1)	
Age Range	24–35	36–45	46–55	55+	
	55% (11)	15% (3)	20% (4)	5% (1)	
Education	High School/GED	Bachelors	Masters	Advanced Degree	
	5% (1)	30% (6)	50% (10)	15% (3)	
Income	$0–$20k	$21k–$40k	$41k–$60k	$61k–$80k	$81k and above
	5% (1)	25% (5)	15% (3)	25% (5)	30% (6)
Religion	Catholic/Protestant	Jewish	Muslim	LDS (Mormon)	Agnostic/Spiritual, not religious
	60% (2/10)	5% (1)	5% (1)	5% (1)	25% (3/2)
Therapy Training	General MFT	EFT	Counseling	None	
	40% (8)	20% (4)	15% (3)	25% (5)	

Note. *n*, number of participants.

your journey to become more secure…what were your initial steps?" "What helped you open up to others and trust they would still be there for you in your vulnerability?" "Can you tell me about any influential relationships and how they helped you become more secure?" and "Would you describe yourself as stubborn? If so, what role, if any, do you think stubbornness has had in your becoming more secure?" (This last question emerged as an important concept to ask about in later interviews). Follow-up questions depended on participants' answers to the primary questions.

Most interviews were conducted via phone or secure video conference, as many participants were scattered across the United States. When possible, local participants gave their interview in person at a private therapy office. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the research team. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hr, and all participants who completed an interview were compensated with a $20 gift card. All participants were asked to tell their story of how they became more secure in their relationships and were asked follow-up questions based on their responses. As new ideas emerged from interviews, the interview guide was modified as needed to reflect the emerging categories and themes (Charmaz, 2014). For instance, stubbornness or a similar characteristic consistently emerged as an important condition of earning security in early interviews and was then asked more about in later interviews.

Data Analysis

After interviews were transcribed, they were uploaded into the qualitative analysis software, TAMS (Weinstein, 2012), which was used at each stage of analysis. In constructivist grounded theory, analysis proceeds with several coding steps, including initial, focused, axial, and theoretical coding. This process involves breaking the data into thematic pieces, and then reassembling those

into categories that help explain the process or actions of the phenomena begin studied (Charmaz, 2014). In the initial coding phase, we conducted open coding, which included a line-by-line reading of the transcripts and labeling words or phrases with terms to summarize the process or meaning suggested. It is helpful to use gerunds (words ending in -ing) to help focus on actions and attachment changing processes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Some examples of early codes generated from the open coding process were as follows: Accepting Self, Finding Alternative Attachments, Trying New Things, Trusting People, and There Must Be More. In the focused coding stage of analysis, we gathered frequently occurring or analytically strong codes to refine, sort, and synthesize data as we continued to interview participants (Charmaz, 2014). This process of ongoing analysis helped to shape subsequent interviews as thematically rich content began to get developed into categories. At this stage, sample focused codes included the following: Developing Surrogate Attachments, Opening up to Others, Being Intentional, and Making Changes with Family of Origin.

Theoretical sampling and axial coding occurred simultaneously and recursively. In theoretical sampling, data collection was categorical to develop each category's properties until no new properties emerged (Charmaz, 2014). In axial coding, categories were related to subcategories as the analysis moved up the levels of abstraction toward theory building. As analysis progressed throughout the study, themes and categories were arranged into a model explaining the process of earning security. A key part of analysis in grounded theory is to write memos as a way to develop analytic ideas, identify a priori assumptions and ideas from literature, situate categories within the emerging theory, and sharpen comparisons between categories (Charmaz, 2014). Memos also are used reflexively to account for researcher presence and role in the analysis as analytic decisions are made.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Throughout the study, we used various methods to maintain rigor and establish credible results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, a research team member served as a secondary coder, discussed similarities and differences in codes, and generated ideas related to theory development. Second, each participant received a copy of drafted results and were invited to provide feedback regarding the extent to which the narrative represented their journey of attachment growth. Nine participants responded. Two provided suggestions on language used to describe participants' surrogate attachment relationships with God and faith communities. One offered description suggestions regarding subtheme names. The remaining commented they felt the results were an accurate representation of their process of earning security and had no suggested revisions. Every suggested revision was considered and incorporated when it applied to the majority of participants or offered substantial critique of key elements of the constructed theory of earning security. Incorporating participants' suggested revisions strengthen the credibility of the findings because doing so ensured the researchers' participation in theory construction accurately represented participants' voices and experiences. Finally, multiple external auditors provided feedback on the coherence and rigor of the results. This occurred through university colleagues and advisors as the analysis and data were reviewed at multiple points along the process. This resulted in more questions and reflection. Also, the main EFT developer and attachment theory expert reviewed the analysis and results and also provided feedback and suggestions (S. Johnson, personal communication, February 15, 2019).

RESULTS

Description of the Grounded Theory of Earning Secure Attachment

Although each participant's respective background and experience of attachment change was unique, our analysis resulted in a coherent grounded theory describing a general process of earning secure attachment. The theory of adult positive attachment style change developed from participants' responses consists of three major categories, presented in bold font with solid-framed circles in Figure 1. The first category is *meta-conditions of earning security* that span time and acts as a thread tying together the other two primary categories and other processes. The foremost meta-conditions for all participants were "being intentional" (most important) and "having surrogate attachment figures" through whom they saw new possibilities modeled for them. Their significance
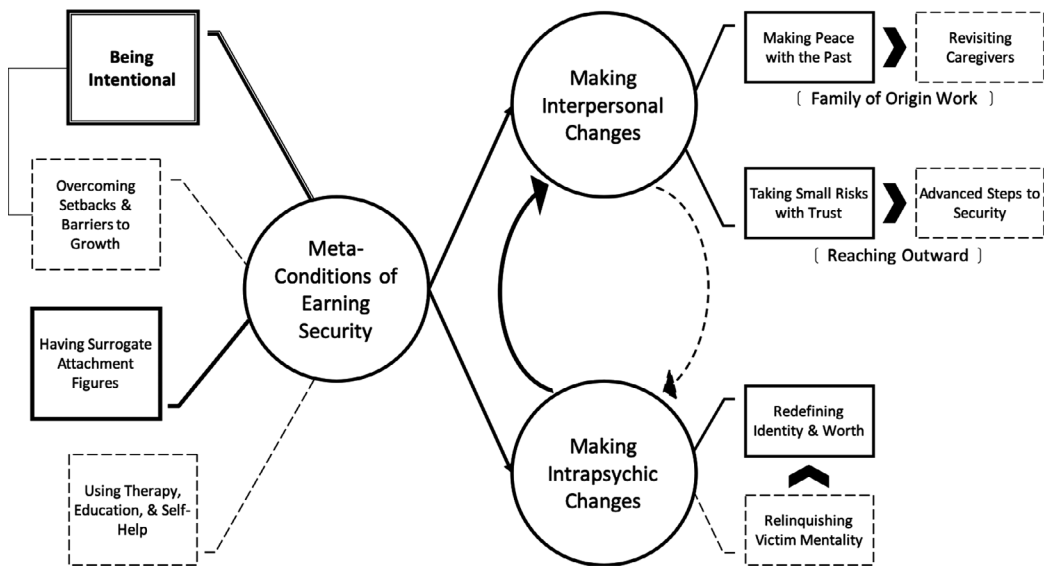
Figure 1. Process model of earning secure attachment.

is symbolized in Figure 1 by a framed box with bold font and a solid box, respectively. Nearly all participants said attachment change was the result of intentional effort along with having someone after whom to model self-worth and relationships.

The second major category is *making intrapsychic changes,* which involves changes within people that resulted in earned security. The most important of the intrapsychic changes for all participants was "redefining identity and worth," symbolized by a solid box in Figure 1. There is also a relationship between "redefining identity and worth" and "relinquishing the victim mentality," where some participants who initially saw themselves as victims had to give that up as they engaged in the process of "redefining identity and worth," represented in the figure by the uni-directional arrow. The third major category, *making interpersonal changes,* involved processes at the interpersonal level, or actions that participants took with others that helped them move toward secure attachment. These changes are represented in the figure by the bracketed subcategories, "family of origin work" and "reaching outward." These involved "making peace with the past" and "taking small risks with trust," respectively, also represented by solid boxes.

Changes at the interpersonal and intrapsychic categories influence one another, which are represented in Figure 1 by the cycle between the two, though the relationship is not equal. Based on participants' accounts, they could make intrapsychic changes before making interpersonal changes and still experience some positive change. However, they could not make interpersonal changes without also making intrapsychic changes. This is displayed by a solid arrow proceeding from "making intrapsychic changes" and a dotted arrow proceeding from "making interpersonal changes." Once participants actively made both types of changes, this process was then ongoing and recursive. Finally, while the solid boxes represent essential aspects of attachment change that all participants experienced, the dotted-lined boxes represent either less-crucial aspects or aspects experienced by the majority of the sample but not all participants.

Major Category 1: Meta-Conditions of Positive Attachment Style Change

The meta-conditions of positive attachment change occur concurrently with participants' interpersonal and intrapsychic changes, acting as either facilitators of change in both areas or ensuring continued progress toward secure attachment. These meta-conditions include being intentional about attachment-focused change, overcoming barriers and setbacks, therapy and self-help, and having surrogate attachment figures.

Being intentional about attachment-focused change. Perhaps the most crucial element to participants' change toward greater attachment security was realizing change does not happen by

accident. Being intentional about attachment change included deliberate efforts that reflected initiative and diligence. The process is hard and grueling, and many participants described they had to be intentional at several junctions of their journey. This was especially true in overcoming setbacks and barriers (see Figure 1). For example, one woman likened the process of being intentional to "learning it's really not just going to be a switch, it's kind of an ongoing battle." Some had to be intentional about engaging in self-reflection or mindfulness, and others discussed being intentional about their words and actions with friends, family, spouses, and even children.

A subcategory demonstrating how attachment change is an intentional process was the shift participants described from stubbornness to resolve. Every participant described themselves as stubborn, determined, unwavering, or persistent. The majority of the sample resonated with "stubborn." Further conversations revealed two sides to "stubbornness," one marked by bull-headedness, and the other more like resilience, resolve, and persistence. As one woman put it,

> Early in my childhood and my early adulthood, stubbornness was really like my biggest fault. It's, "You're going to be right or nothing at all." And then I think as I work to grow emotionally, that stubbornness has exactly helped me get to where I want to be.

Both stubbornness and resolve were related to the idea persistence, but there were differences in the direction of the persistence. Stubbornness describes how participants' persisted in patterns that kept them stuck in insecure strategies. However, when they resolved to change, this same resolve led to strongly seek their goals related to security. For example, one participant said, "I don't often describe myself as stubborn, but when I have my mind made up, I would say I am unwavering." When asked what role this played in her growth toward security, she linked it to a change in her knowledge of her value and worth, an intrapsychic change: "Once I discovered I have value apart from everyone else…It's like I've decided my time and energy is valuable so I'm gonna spend it on people who also value me." At times, participants' stubbornness contributed to their going through rough patches, discussed next.

Overcoming setbacks and barriers to growth. Change rarely occurs in a clean, straight line, and setbacks were a common experience of participants. When asked about falling back into old, insecure habits, they all affirmed they did. Yet each described overcoming. For example, one said, "It's a lot of falling and then realizing, 'Oh, this place isn't good.' And then figuring out, 'Okay, where did I go [wrong]?'" Additionally, each participant recalled various barriers to growth, some of which were self-imposed. For example, several described how they would test their closest relationships to see if they would hold up. As one said, "I would test my friends…you see how much you can push them away before they just run away." Despite the occurrence of setbacks and barriers along the road toward greater security, participants were all able to find meaning in the rough spots and process of overcoming them. When asked what helped them in this process, one of the most common responses was "lots of practice," which carries with it a sense of resolve and intentionality. Participants also reported overcoming setbacks and barriers to growth by strengthening their own voice, learning to set boundaries with others, practicing self-care, and revising how they approached conflict with others.

Having surrogate attachment figures. For participants to learn new ways of approaching relationships and conflict more securely, they had to first observe it, and they frequently did so in the context of surrogate attachment relationships, another major meta-condition of positive attachment change. These figures included adults who acted as parent figures, college mentors, friends, church communities, spouses, and therapists.

Early "parent" figures—For some whose journey toward security began while still minors, these surrogate figures tended to be safe adults who took participants under their wings in various ways. For one participant who turned to an extended family member when her own parents were the sources of insecurity, observing a new way of behaving in relationships made a big difference in her ability to reach out and connect with others: "I think having my aunt and seeing that relationship and her reaching out, you know, it kind of dissolved the fear of it."

God and faith communities—Several people in this sample are people of faith, and some spoke about how God and people in their faith communities served as models of secure attachment for them. For one, this figure was a church youth minister. For another, she described the healing effect of God's words to her in the *Bible*, "Mentally, I knew what [Christian] Scripture said…it said

He was going to use it (i.e., the suffering she experienced) for good. But actually letting it take root was two different things. Once it did, it's like a measure of grace is increasingly taking root." Another described how her relationship with God and "learning more about God and the way that He forgives us" assisted her in forgiving those who hurt her. For participants of faith, members of their religious community and God were important parts of their journey toward more secure attachment.

Spouses, mentors, and friends—Married participants cited spouses several times as the primary attachment figure of their adult lives, playing a leading role in helping them grow in security. For example, one participant valued that her husband helped her become more comfortable with less conflict in their relationship by setting boundaries in how they would speak with each other during disagreements. This prompted her to reflect on conflict, saying "The changing force for me was I had somebody who dug his heels in and said, 'I'm not going anywhere, for better or worse.'" Others described having mentors or friends who were living out a more secure story in their lives. One participant stated, "I knew I wanted to do it differently. So, I sought out people that looked like they were doing well." Regarding friendship, one participant noted, "I think the bulk of the work was done with friends. Certain key friendships have shown me that certain people can be depended on more than I have known." Another also cited friendship as a key to their growth in learning to distinguish between safe and unsafe people: "Developing really good friendships that were reciprocal instead of one-sided showed me it wasn't all people that were [unsafe]. I had the ability to look at both [positive and negative relationships] and say, 'This one is better.'".

Surrogate attachment relationships modeled what secure attachment could look and feel like. Participants were then able to visualize a more secure life and how relationships could be different. As one woman said, "If I had never seen [a secure example] and only had bad experiences, I know [change] would have been a lot harder." While these relationships were invaluable to the process of positive attachment change, there were also changes that had to occur at an intrapsychic level for transformation to continue. For many, therapy, education, or self-help was a bridge to making intrapsychic and interpersonal changes.

Using therapy, education, and self-help. Nearly all participants reported attending therapy at some point in their journey toward secure attachment, including individual, couple, and/or group therapy. The most commonly cited foci of therapy were relationship education, couple therapy, and trauma healing. Several reported receiving attachment-focused therapy and narrative therapy. Some also took advantage of relationship education events like Hold Me Tight® workshops (Johnson, 2019) or marriage retreats in an effort to increase the security of their intimate partnerships. One participant highlighted the benefits or attending an attachment-based marital workshop with her spouse "to deepen our connection and find more security."

One of the other most commonly cited forms of therapy that participants sought to heal wounds and create secure attachment was trauma-focused therapy, such as eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), or groups for survivors of childhood sexual abuse or for survivors of domestic violence. Formal education and continuous learning also contributed to participants' increased comfort with who they are and feeling more secure in their relationships. Referring to making attachment-related changes, one participant said, "I think the more education I get, the more I'm able to apply it to my own life." Informally, many participants found self-help books to be beneficial, influencing both the intrapsychic and interpersonal changes they were making.

Major Category 2: Making Intrapsychic Changes

The meta-conditions of positive attachment change prepared the ground for the two main aspects of positive attachment change: making intrapsychic changes and interpersonal changes. For positive change to last, internal changes at a cognitive, emotional, and spiritual level had to take place. For this sample, intrapsychic changes involved redefining their identity and worth as a human being and giving up the mentality of victimhood. Not everyone held a victimhood mentality to give up, but those who did needed to relinquish this mentality before they could redefine their identity and worth. This process is represented by the uni-directional arrow in Figure 1.

Redefining identity and realizing one's own worth. A crucial part of earning security is the redefinition of identity. For many, an important condition of this micro-process was having a

moment where they realized, "This isn't who I want to be." They not only desired to do something different but also to be different, to be transformed. Redefining identity involved intentionally reframing self-doubts as wrong and reframing perceived negative qualities into strengths. As one participant said, "Realizing how much of all of these things that I had walked through were really just lies…Recognizing that was huge." Another was able to keep moving forward by reminding herself, "Fight, like an ongoing battle of fighting the lies with truth. Saying, 'No, no. That's not who I am.'".

When participants saw themselves differently, it was partly a result of the journey and partly a function of it. For example, seeing themselves differently involved self-acceptance and realizing the magnitude of their worth. Sometimes a professional facilitated this. "Counseling helped me realize," one said, "'Just me, just who I am, that's good enough.'" Once participants saw their own value, their self-worth rose, and often they were able to treat others better from a more secure stance. Many participants noted receiving explicit and implicit messages in childhood that they had little value in and of themselves. So, part of the transformation of self as they became more secure was realizing, as one person put it, "I'm not broken," and "I am enough." Once participants saw themselves as having great value, their self-esteem rose, and often, they were able to then treat others better, from a more secure stance, because they loved themselves better.

Relinquishing the victim mentality. Many participants reported childhoods marred by trauma, abuse, or parental mental illness, and it is not surprising some developed a victim perspective on life. However, they also affirmed giving up that mentality was crucial for their growth, as it allowed them the ability and freedom to take additional security-growing actions. Several described a type of entitlement to act a certain way because of the circumstances they grew up in, so being humbled was key to developing strength and resilience consistent with a secure attachment style. As one put it, sometimes you just have to be "knocked off your high horse," to see there are other ways of living. Some gave up their victim identity by being receptive to accountability. As one person said, "For me it was about being receptive to [feedback], to get myself to a place where I could hear it." Not only did they need to embrace accountability but also they had to take responsibility for their actions. In victimhood, everything that goes wrong is always somebody else's fault. One participant realized this tendency in herself and said, "I grew up with blamers…it was always someone else's fault, [and] I started to recognize that pattern in myself." Participants discovered when they intentionally owned their actions in relationships, their interactions with others improved.

Major Category 3: Making Interpersonal Changes

Making peace with the past. Once participants began making intrapsychic changes to their identity and sense of worth, they were positioned to make interpersonal changes along two arms: family of origin work (via making peace with the past and revisiting caregivers with a new lens) and reaching outward (via taking small steps with trust then taking advanced steps toward security). Making peace with the past began with participants changing their views, expectations, and feelings toward their parents or primary childhood caregivers. For example, some participants stopped striving for their parents' approval and basing their sense of worth on whether or not they received such approval: "It's easier to be okay with you when you're not trying to be who you think they want you to be." It was marked by an awareness of "there being more" to family relationships than what participants grew up knowing. As one said, "Once I …[realized] my mother couldn't trust others but even more so couldn't trust her own opinion, I told myself I didn't want that. So that awareness helped change it for me." In these cases, participants were able to reframe their parents' problems as insecurities or identify negative family patterns in which their parents were stuck, resulting in parents not knowing how to be a secure figure. Reframing led to setting boundaries with caregivers, which is one example of how the meta-process of overcoming barriers influenced interpersonal changes. Sometimes this meant limiting contact; as one participant said, "I've had to place a little bit of distance there for [my mom and me] to have any kind of a healthy relationship." Finally, making peace with the past involved forgiving caregivers. This meant being able to move beyond hurt and anger. For example, one participant said, "It started with me getting past the hurt and not being angry with what I had had to walk and coming to appreciate that walking through what I did, it has made me a lot more."

Revisiting caregivers with a new lens. After participants made peace with the past, family of origin work continued into interacting differently with parents/caregivers. Once able to reframe their caregivers' insecure behavior, some had new conversations with their families. One woman said, "[My therapist] gave me some insight in sharing someone else's story of pain. So, I was able to revisit my mom with a new lens. That was growth also. That was a huge step forward." Part of revisiting caregivers with a new lens involved conversations about forgiveness that participants extended in their hearts as they made peace with the past. One described her changed relationship with her mother, "We still have our issues, but I think she respects that I've stepped out of that mold, so it was really good to facilitate [a] conversation with her about forgiveness." This step also served as an eye-opening experience for participants about the disparities between how they grew up and the person they wanted to be, which was a catalyst for a shift in identity. After a social experience with her mom in adulthood, one said, "I realized I have my own opinions, and that trusting of myself extends to the trusting of others." This realization appeared to bridge family of origin work with relationships with friends, communities, and significant others.

Taking small risks with trust. The second arm of making interpersonal changes was classified as "reaching outward," where participants took steps in behaving more securely with people outside the family (e.g., friends, coworkers, community groups). This began with a willingness to try something new and taking small risks with trust. This included joining a community, being open to connection, having shared experiences with others, and receiving support. Participants emphasized the benefits of becoming part of a community with similar values, interest, or goals, such as a faith community, higher education, or interest groups. Joining a community and getting involved with its members also necessitated opening up to connection. This was an intentional process that required, as participants said, a "leap of faith," "actively working on the willingness to trust," and "a willingness to set aside your own ego and objectively give someone the benefit of the doubt instead of letting your anxiety take over." Early steps in reaching outward included having shared experiences with others who understood the experience. For one participant, it was helpful having a family member who understood through shared experience of what the participant had gone through. She said, "I fortunately had people in my family. . .[who] understood what I was walking and had kind of experienced the same thing." Finally, reaching outward involved accepting support from significant others, including therapists and intimate partners. For example, one participant felt supported by her therapist who said, "I know this process. I know this is hard for you, but I know where we're at; we're talking about this, and you're going to get there." Another participant explained her work in individual therapy as "giving more support to that part of myself that has those longings. . . strengthening and using my adult self to help get those longings met."

Advanced steps to earning security. Once participants began to see themselves as worthy, valuable, and enough, many described being able to reach out to others in new ways. At this stage, they became more intentional about treating others better, "showing up" in new, more vulnerable and authentic ways. This often included becoming an attachment figure or mentor to someone else. One of the advanced steps in the process involved making a shift from always needing something from others to balancing that with "being a friend to other people" in return. One male participant pointed out how sometimes, being a good friend can feel one-sided, but it is a necessary part of building more secure relationships. He went on to say, "I still am the friend who's interested, but I'm also going to show up more and be more vulnerable and take more risks and let my friends know me more fully than I have historically."

Once participants were more comfortable with themselves, the process extended to actively pursuing connection. As one said, "I think the more comfortable I am with myself, I will seek out relationships that are more compatible with who I am." It was also important to identify qualities in others that were congruent with one's own values. Finally, an action similar to but a step beyond "being a good friend" is becoming an attachment figure or mentor to someone else. As one woman said, "As I started to heal myself, I started to realize I was a part of something bigger than myself, and I needed to give back."

The Interaction Between Interpersonal Changes and Intrapsychic Changes

The process of making interpersonal changes often occurred cyclically with making intrapsychic changes for participants. For example, some participants changed interpersonally while

making the internal changes involved with relinquishing a victim mentality and redefining their identity and worth. Taking baby steps with trusting others helped them see themselves in a more positive, worthier light. Others, however, began by focusing on the internal changes that ultimately enabled them to interact differently with others. Although the two parts of earning security were mutually influential, their relative influence differed. Participants indicated they could not usually make interpersonal changes without also making intrapsychic changes, whether previously or simultaneously. On the other hand, participants could make intrapsychic changes without simultaneously making changes interpersonally. Further, the meta-conditions of positive attachment change facilitated both intrapsychic and interpersonal changes. For example, surrogate attachment figures often helped participants redefine their identity and worth as well as take new steps in relationships. Also, the process of making intrapsychic changes was described as difficult and lengthy for many, demonstrating the experience of barriers and the need to display persistence and intentionality in overcoming the barriers to continue earning security.

Gender Similarities and Differences in Earning Security

Although the ratio of female to male participants was 3:1, we felt it was important to consider the ways in which the process of gaining attachment security was similar and different for the male and female participants in the study. Overall, male and female participants described similar processes of positive change, but they differed along a few key points. A primary difference was in "redefining identity and worth." Male participants often talked about having to navigate through cultural expectations of what it meant to be male, which served as a potential growth barrier, and choose behaviors not typically encouraged in males (showing the "softer" side, being more vulnerable, etc.). For example, one male recalled a shift in his own understanding of manhood because of a mentoring relationship:

> [He said to me], 'You don't know what you're doing. There's a different way to live; let me show you how to do that.' I grew so much in those 6 months that I was mentored by that guy. I think that was just a shift in my culture of understanding. And maybe being a man was more about being able to admit my weaknesses and ask for help rather than just trying to figure it out on my own and blindly stumble along.

The primary difference for men earning security involved redefining their identities as males and adopting security-enhancing attitudes and behaviors not typically socialized in men.

DISCUSSION

This research project began with the question: What is the process by which people earn attachment security? Those who shared their stories offered many details on how this process occurs in those who describe currently secure attachment representations but recall insecure, poor parent–child relationships in childhood (Main & Goldwyn, 1998; Saunders et al., 2011). The grounded theory that developed from this analysis illustrates how the process of attachment change is multifaceted and requires deliberate effort. Across the board, being intentional about making changes in how participants saw themselves, interacted in relationships, and handled inevitable rough patches were core conditions of earning security.

We inquired about three secondary research questions, including what role does therapy play in participants attachment change? Many participants attended therapy and mentioned treatment and the relationship with their therapist as useful in helping them earn security. Saunders et al. (2011) similarly found that earned-secure women reported attending therapy longer and more often than insecure or continuously secure women. They surmised the effectiveness of long-term therapy may be due to the therapist being a surrogate attachment figure who also helps clients refine their abilities to coherently reflect on past events (Saunders et al., 2011). Other studies examining attachment change using differing numbers of sessions have also shown more positive change for those who attended more sessions of therapy (e.g., Burgess Moser et al., 2015).

We also wanted to understand specific conditions that made earning security possible, which we discuss briefly. The process of positive attachment change also required participants to make peace with their families of origin, which often contributed to their attachment insecurity.

Additionally, participants had to experience transformation regarding their identity and worth, which often constituted a corrective emotional experience, consistent with the tenets of change in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1958) and EFT (S. Johnson, personal communication, February 15, 2019). Many had to also stop seeing themselves as the victim of their circumstances before they could take hold of a more secure life. This is consistent with literature that asserts people who display resilience characteristics after stressful or traumatic life experiences are capable of forming secure attachments (Conner, 2006; Rutter, 1985).

Finally, we wanted to understand how close relationships influence earning security, which we saw the most where participants all described taking part in various forms of "reaching outward." They passed security on by connecting with others, becoming a secure figure or mentor for someone else, and being a good friend. In tandem, working on three types of relationship (relationship to family of origin, relationship with self, and relationship with others) resulted in increased security for participants.

Study Contributions

While previous literature suggests attachment change is possible (e.g., Bowlby, 1958; Burgess Moser et al., 2015; Davila et al., 1997; Waters et al., 2000c), there is limited empirical literature on *how* positive change occurs (Saunders et al., 2011). Bowlby (1958) believed attachments form very early in a person's life through the level of accessibility and responsiveness a primary caregiver provides to a child. Ongoing experiences either confirm or revise initial impressions. For years, many scholars assumed that once a primary style of attachment is established in childhood, it will not alter much as the child grows (Waters et al., 2000a, 2000b). The main exception to this described in the literature is when people with previously secure attachment experience a traumatic event or go through an stressful life transition and slip into anxious or avoidant behaviors (Davila et al., 1997; Hamilton, 2000; Unger & De Luca, 2014). The Saunders et al.'s (2011) study advanced the literature on earning security by focusing on the role of alternate support figures, and in the process, discovered that women classified as earned-secure spent more hours in therapy than those who classified as continuously secure or insecure. The grounded theory developed in this study contributes support for both the role of alternative support figures (here named surrogate attachment figures) and participation in therapy while adding in additional dimensions such as the importance of being intentional, making intrapsychic changes such as resolving trauma, and making interpersonal changes such as family of origin work and becoming an alternative attachment figure for others.

This study advances the work of scholars such as Saunders et al. (2011) and explicates in greater detail the intricate process of earning secure attachment for women while introducing evidence of this process for men. Though adult attachment theory supports that primary attachment relationships can include friends, psychotherapists, or other family members, most studies have suggested attachment change is most likely to occur within committed adult romantic relationships (e.g., Burgess Moser et al., 2015), leaving a gap regarding how singles or those in casual dating relationships can become more secure. This study adds more avenues for change by involving single/never married, dating, and divorced, as well as married participants. Given the small number of single/never married participants in the sample, we tentatively suggest the process of change was similar regardless of relationship status, with a potential difference being who was named as surrogate attachment figures. Singles did not name spouses or romantic partners as such figures but rather cited friends, mentors, therapists, or extended family members, in line with the findings of Mikulincer and Shaver (2007). That said, married participants did not rely solely on their spouses and also grew in the context of friendships, therapy, and mentoring relationships.

Clinical Implications

The results of this study suggest several practical implications for mental health practitioners. In all, 14 out of 20 participants endorsed having attended some type of therapy along their journey and several of those said therapy helped them grow in attachment security. Participants had therapists from a variety of orientations, but one of the most commonly repeated aspects related to increased attachment security was the therapist. Therapy was particularly helpful when the therapist was engaged with them in the present moment, validated the participants, and, in cases of

long-term therapy, never gave up on the participants. Regardless of theoretical orientation, the therapists modeled secure attachment for their clients, giving them opportunities for safely taking the risks necessary to grow into security. Those with childhood abuse or other forms of trauma specifically cited the benefit of working with a therapist trained in some form of trauma-focused therapy in addition to other approaches. Earning attachment security is a process, and often is long and involved. It requires commitment, resolve, and sometimes some stubbornness. If therapy is not a viable option, it is still very important to surround oneself with people who share a desire for connection and will hold themselves and others accountable. People may also find self-help books useful.

All of the participants in this study benefitted from connections with others, some of whom were identified as trustworthy and surrogate attachment figures. In turn, some articulated a desire to pay it forward and help others who needed this kind of support. Some volunteered as a mentor, acted as a good friend (available and responsive while also setting boundaries), or worked with young people teaching them social and emotional skills. Many mentioned only one or two people as influential, which suggests a responsive person or two can make a big difference. As such, the results provide narrative support for such programs as Big Brothers, Big Sisters of America, as they are designed to match disadvantaged children with a mentor who can be a caring and responsive figure.

Limitations and Future Research

Although male voices were included in this study, their representation was small. This is consistent with most studies of this type (e.g., Davila et al., 1997; Saunders et al., 2011). While several males took the screening survey, very few met the interview criteria, and fewer agreed to an interview. The reason(s) for such a small number qualifying and agreeing to participate are unknown, and more definitive conclusions require further investigation of gender differences in how people increase their attachment security.

Previous research has documented positive attachment change in a low-risk sample (Saunders et al., 2011). Interestingly, the participants in our sample tended to have remarkably severe childhood experiences, such as childhood sexual abuse, parents with severe mental illnesses, like bipolar disorder and alcoholism, or parents who physically abandoned them. Also, several experienced various forms of domestic violence as they aged. In other words, our sample was high risk but also demonstrated positive attachment change. The results suggest that earning security is not only possible for low-risk people but it is also possible for people who come out of extreme childhood situations. However, earning security is not a one-size-fits all process and may vary depending on the type of trauma and other contextual factors. Future qualitative studies should employ theoretical sampling of those from low-risk, average childhoods and screen them for positive attachment change.

Additionally, 75% of this sample had training in some form of professional counseling or MFT, and of that number, four participants reported specific training in emotionally focused therapy, an overtly attachment-based model. One drawback to this is that our model of positive attachment change is based less on layperson voices, and the results may be influenced in part by the training of the majority of the sample. Some noted how their professional training led them to seek out therapy for themselves and to be more conscious of their personal growth processes. However, attending therapy was not the biggest, most crucial element to positive change for most participants, which is why the model focuses more on other elements such as being intentional. Also, many participants discussed growing in attachment security and attending therapy *before* pursuing professional training in counseling or MFT, which suggests to us that professional therapists and counselors may not be more likely than non-professionals to seek out or experience attachment change. We also conceptualized participants' therapy training as giving them more eloquent language to describe their change processes, but we did not mistake their training as the main reasons they pursued change.

We would be remiss if we did not discuss the potential limitations to the applicability of our current grounded theory model based on sample income, education levels, race, and relationship status. This sample represents privilege along the first three of these dimensions, and this should be taken into account when applying the model in less privileged communities. Namely, application

should be done tentatively. Also, while this model opens up avenues for change for singles, there were not enough male or single participants to make more definitive conclusions about what the process of earning security may be like for them. Future research to expand the model should include more participants from low income, less educated, and non-Caucasian groups. Additionally, pursuing samples that include more men and single participants would expand this model's applicability.

Finally, there are always limitations to research when conditions are self-reported and subjective by nature. Participants retrospectively recalled the state of their childhood attachments on the screening survey, the memories of which, as some have theorized (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), can be influenced by the quality of their current relationships and circumstances. However, as participants told their stories, they did so with hallmark signs of people with secure attachment (George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996) and described newfound characteristics (e.g., believing themselves to be worthy of love and basing their sense of self on non-contingent sources) that are theoretically consistent with existing literature (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Park, Crocker, & Mickelson, 2004). Future studies, such as a longitudinal analysis of attachment change, could also track participants' positive change over time and investigate how the dyadic process of earned security is similar to and different from an individual process of change. This study sought to better understand the factors involved in how participants became more secure in their relationships via their subjective perspectives. We recognize the subjectivity of our data may be construed as less reliable; however, we see our participants' subjective reports of their processes of earning security to be the most valuable sources of information for theory construction. We recognize they, not us, are the experts of their own lives, and hearing their stories from their perspectives is important to building a theory of earning security. Future investigations can test this theory to provide more objective assertions of how positive attachment change occurs.

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